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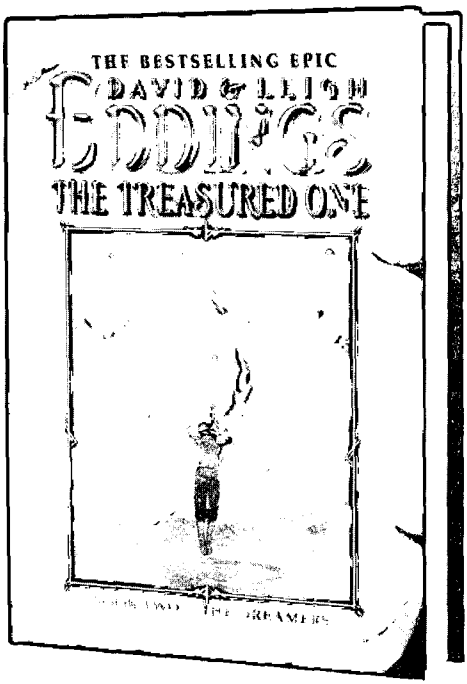


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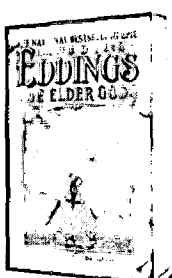


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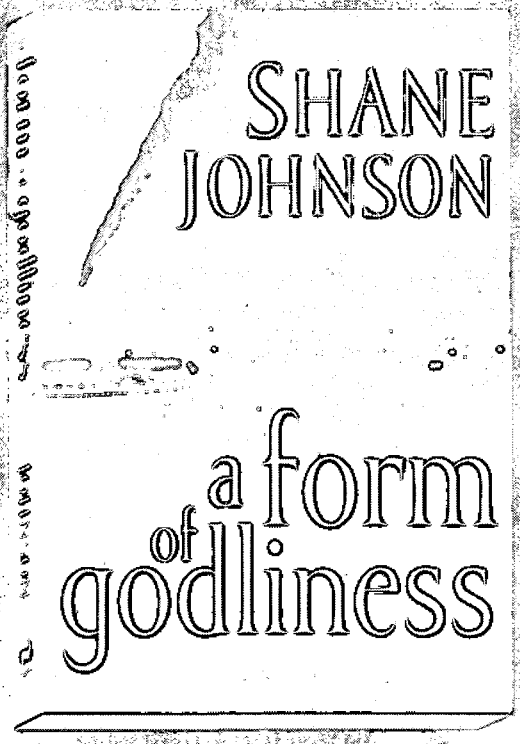


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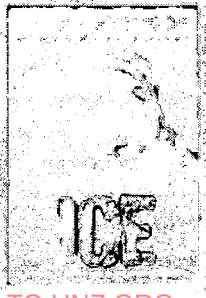


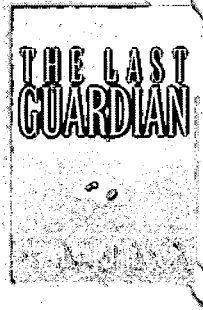


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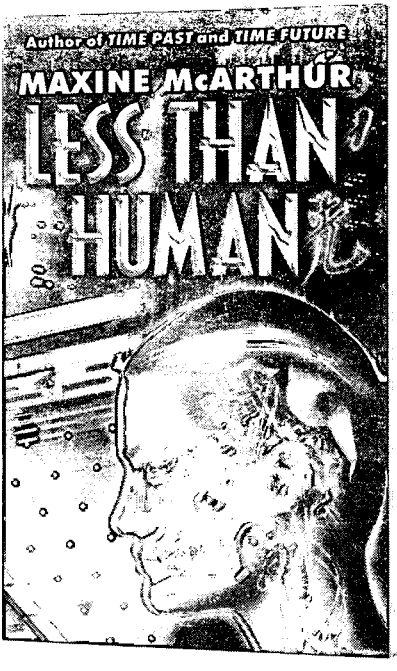


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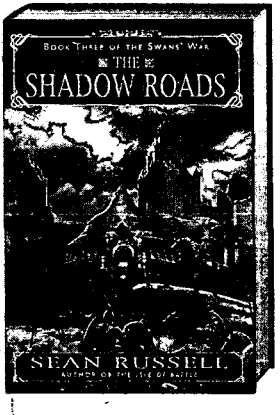


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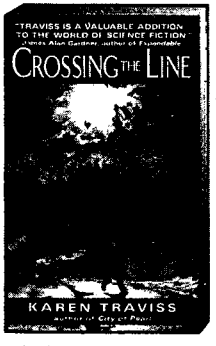
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THE MAGAZINE OF
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December • 56th Year of Publication

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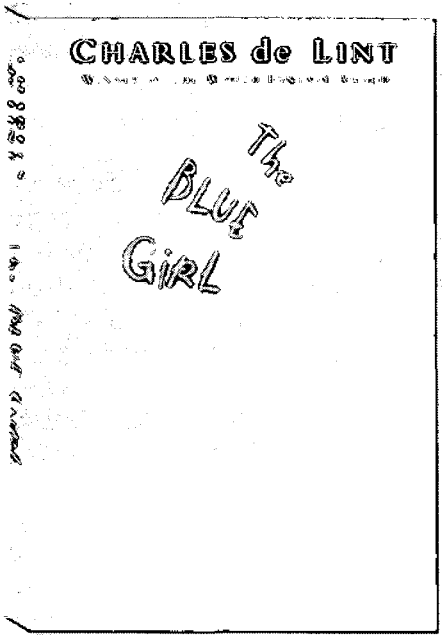


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*Down in Texas, there are folks who still talk of how big Chad Oliver worked mightily from his deathbed to finish his novel* The Cannibal Owl. *Odds are good that similar stories about Jack Cady will circulate in the Pacific Northwest for years to come. Jack's partner, novelist Carol Orlock, says that Jack was meeting with students and working on this story in the hospital right up until cancer took his life this past March. You might feel the urgency in the latter half of the story.*

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# Fog

## By Jack Cady

The moving finger having writ moves on
Nor all your piety and wit
Will call it back to cancel half a line

I

THESE MISTS ONLY HAPPEN in the river-south where fogs hang thick as soiled fleece; and where, in that nigh-solid cloak, the dead are not exactly dead; the alive not quite alive. All an outsider can say is that movement trudges, dashes, or slides like luminescent streamers through the fog.

Folks who live here understand movement, or some parts. It happens from listening to old people tell tales:

"Yass," they say about movement now going on in the fog, "that there tall fellow is the preacher, still a-huntin', still callin' for his datter, still searchin' for a man to send to hell. Now, that preacher is blacker 'n Old Nick's backside."

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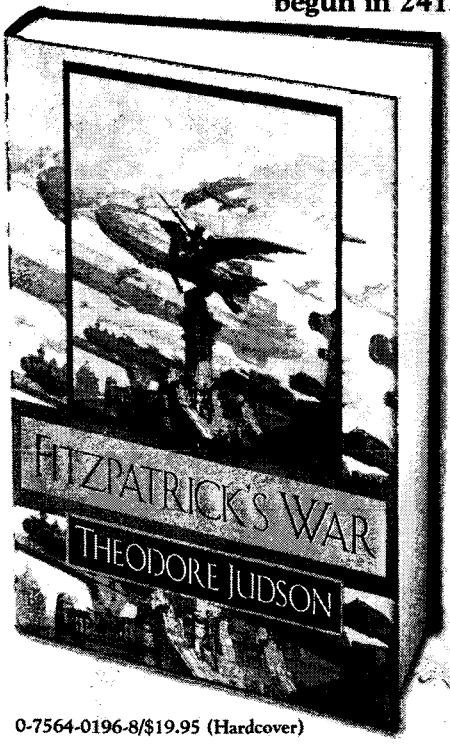


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Or, they say, "...Perfesser is back, the sonovabitch. Old perfesser is payin' his tab for sin...old Perfesser is gonna meet the preacher one-a these days...'cause Preacher ain't gonna be much longer fooled about the Hand...." and they let it go at that. They sit on porches, or around coal fires in worn parlors, or in the galleys of riverboats...tugs, work boats, even motor barges.

I came to the fogs these twenty-seven years past, in days of driving truck along the Cumberland River. I flogged a 600-series Ford with an eighteen-foot van, always running like tiptoe on slickly asphalt because night roads along southern rivers are hardly ever dry. Back then, they called me Slim, or sometimes only "hey, you."

Today they call me Joe, or sometimes Mr. Joe, and I have become "old folks." My bald spot is surrounded by a silver circle of hair, but my eyes are clear behind thick glasses. My head bobs between rounded shoulders as I stock shelves in my small store. (I live in rooms in the back.) The store — groceries and gas and a little hardware — doesn't make much of a living, but it's just across the road from the river.

The river is the mother of fogs, and it is motherly to we who live along its banks. It isn't big and show-off like the Ohio or Mississippi. It carries no floating palaces; restored steamboats, sternwheelers and sidewheelers, nor even many motor yachts. It's a utilitarian river of workmen, work boats, tall tales, yarns, and a few stories that are way too true.

To the left of my store sits the tidy cottage where Annie lives, and beside that a shack where Pete goes to brood, or sleep, or read musty old books...he spends most of the time, day and night, fishing; or sitting around the store, jawing. He tells godawful tales about who, or what, walks, or storms, through the fog. We usually believe him. When the low roar of mobs pulse in the fog, we know we believe him.

To the right of my store sits concrete block apartments, rundown and housing tired wives and tired husbands; people wrenching some kind of living from the river. And, of course, there are children.

"'Tis the children, over and over. We need take best care with the children." Annie has sometimes been beset thinking of children. She is a great favorite of kids from the apartments. She tells them stories, or plays games.

Annie used to command a sixty-four-foot oak-hulled tug, *Louise*

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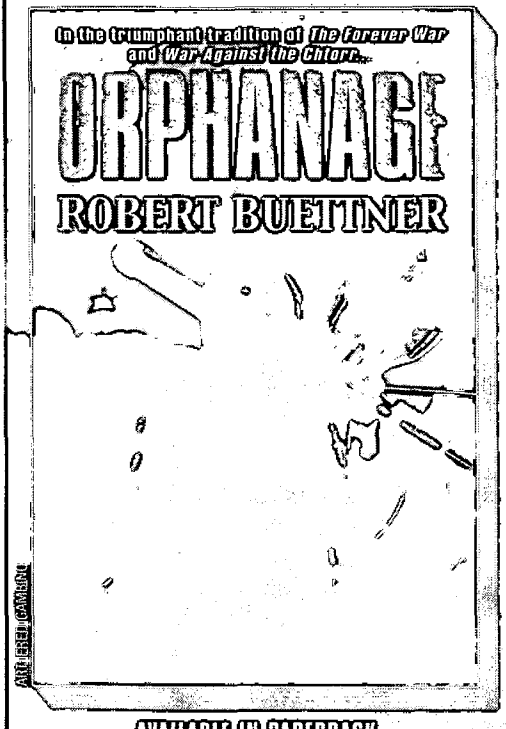

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(known around here as *Stinky Lou* because it mostly towed and carried raft-like barges of oil drums). Annie is lean as a willow leaf, tough as hawser, but now walks a little bent over with age. She has one blue eye, one gray, and she's a little wrinkly, sometimes wise. She still wears work shirts and dungarees. In chilly afternoons she sits beside the stove in the store.

*Stinky Lou* lies aground, butted against a rotting finger pier. She looks dead, but life lingers. On nights when fogs roll thin instead of thick, small light glows in her cabin. Sometimes, when fog is thick, I imagine the river rises and *Stinky Lou* goes a-traveling, looking for a tow.

Annie, who should care, claims she doesn't. "What's done," says she, "is done. I put that old girl to bed with 'airy a sob." She's probably lying, mostly to herself.

Pete's story is different, and more like mine. I got sick of the road and settled. Pete got sick of lay-doctoring up-and-down river; traveling to desperate folk choking, or bleeding, or staring in disbelief at broken legs or arms. Pete is a man of nostrums: old Indian recipes, since he's Indian himself. He can deliver a colt or calf, purge a pneumonia, or sew up wounds...not many lay doctors left anymore. Not since medicare happened. These days, if sick folk want help, they generally come to Pete, not Pete to them.

And so we live, living with just enough problems to keep us occupied and somewhat happy. Or rather, that's the way it was for years, but is no more. Since the preacher returned, and the professor started his old foolishness, our lives have darkened. The story started many years ago:

When all of us were younger, a preacher named Rev. Rufus Middling drifted this way from hill country. He wore a dandy suit and polished shoes, and his minstrel voice could wrap around your soul and make it sing.

Even white folk started church, even white riverfolk; even rivermen, although that voice mostly drew the ladies. Reverend Rufus caused dismay to a stump Baptist preacher, Millard Dee Grubbs. Millard Dee figured coins were dropping in the wrong collection plate.

Looking backward, I thought Rufus Middling honest, but short of judgment. In a day when being black could get a man killed in these parts, Rufus forgot where he was. Or, maybe he'd been too long missionarying

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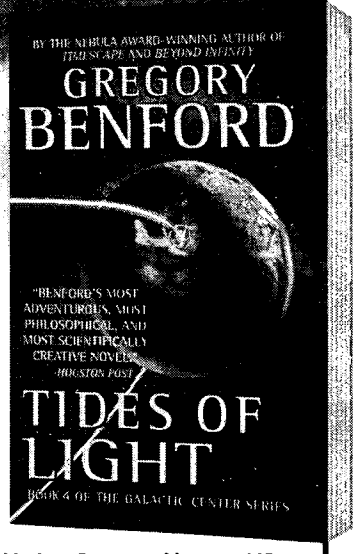
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in coal camps, where black men were scarce as walnuts on a plum tree. Men in coal camps didn't kill over color back then, but over slights, or when drunk, or when sick with work weeks of twelve-hour days, underground and between rocks.

The long and short of it: one day Rufus showed up with a baby, and that baby was cream-color. In that musical voice he claimed it an orphan, left at his door. Hellfire lighted slowly from Millard Dee's pulpit, and from a man called "the professor." A whispering campaign started.

Whispers said Rev. Rufus Middling had planted his seed where it did not belong. The baby, a girl, Sally, could not possibly have a black or Indian mama. The kid's mama had to have been white.

Whispers grew to shouts because Millard Dee kept nagging the professor. The professor began talking rope. A manifestation started drifting in the fog. For want of a better name we called it Hand, and some people claimed it was real. Talk of a rope would have died if not for the manifestation (some claimed it nothing but swirling fog writing messages to itself. Others whispered "Ku Klux").

Professor was a scraggly-haired piece of white trash who taught one-room school in coal camps, put there by the coal company because no one else would go. He left the camps when beat to an inch of his life, because he whipped a child and broke its arm. The professor got off easy, because he did not die. The kid's daddy took an axe handle and broke both of Professor's arms. Professor came down to the river, mad and hurting.

When Millard Dee Grubbs started running his mouth, Professor found a place to put his hate. He was seen in the mist, following the manifestation as it seemed talking to itself, drifting along the riverbank, or crossing the road. Whatever the thing was, it seemed to us ugly as the wants of Satan, awful as the hard thoughts of God.

It drifted like black mist that had been wrapped in a white mist — a robe — or burial shroud — a ghostly gown to carry foul visions. Riverfolk shivered and wondered and talked together. Riverfolk may be clannish, but they move up and down the river. Because they get around, and see other sights, they do not incline to get picky over who beds who.

Any hell that breaks loose will come from country folk who claim to know everything, while not going anywhere. And, of course, hell comes

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from preachers like Millard Dee who could do without God, but not without the Devil.

Folks met the apparition only in the fog, and met it at random. It drifted here, there, everywhere; hovering at the end of piers, like a half-formed thought throwing dark charms at the waters. It emerged from fogs to stand along the roadside where headlights appeared as mist-smoking discs, and where drivers crept at low speed fearing to move ahead, fearing to pull over and stop. It floated, a mystery in mist.

The sum of it was that talk prompted fear, and fear prompted more talk. Then the talk turned to yells. Millard Dee preached that the hand of Satan had pushed Rev. Middling among us. The professor cursed, and nursed his arms which were healing crooked. He drank red whiskey when he could get it.

On an extra-drunken Saturday night he finally hollered up a mob and there was a lynching. Torches flamed in the fog as a gang of hard-yelling drunks (and some not so drunk) pulled Middling from his storefront church. A few rivermen tried to stop it and got beat into the ground for their pains. Yells, hollers, laughter echoed in the fog as Middling, strung up, hung gap-mouthed and silent. The mob poured whiskey on the corpse, but could not get it to burn. While the mob danced and went crazy before the corpse, a riverman sneaked in and saved the baby. He took it down river and gave it to a family of Indians.

Professor went crazy at the loss of the child. Millard Dee Grubbs hollered that the seed of Satan was loose in the world. They called for finding the baby. Then Millard Dee's church burned; fire set by the less-than-loving hand of a riverman. Then another riverman obliged Professor by once more breaking both of Professor's arms. Lots of hate flowing in every direction.

We got through it, though with looks of shame. We partly got through because Pete managed to disappear for a while into the hills, so as not to treat Professor. Professor was all crooked-armed by the time he died of gangrene. Pete came back after the burying.

I now know the name of the mama. It is Annie, and I know why she clings to the river, and why light sometimes shows aboard *Stinky Lou*. Annie goes to meet Rufus Middling.

I'm not the only one who knows, because Pete is no fool. Maybe

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others know, but it's history. Rufus Middling and Professor are long dead. Riverfolk attended a closed-casket burying of Rufus, and also lots of farmfolk attended; satisfied smirks as preachers hovered on the sidelines. Rufus drew a better crowd than showed up for Professor's burying, which no riverfolk attended. Riverfolk didn't give a rap.

Millard Dee is still alive and causing grief. That's part of our problem, but only part.

"The child is out there," Pete tells me. "Sally wanders her way home, but growed up now."

Pete told me, and, as it turns out, told Annie. He did it on a fog-ridden night when the river had yielded only two small channel cat, and a couple of throw-back trash-fish. Pete slumped on a stool beside the iron stove where an oak fire glimmered behind an isinglass window. Oak makes a good-smelling fire, and it mixed with store smells of leaf tobacco, smoked hams hanging, and the worked leather of tool belts.

Pete once stood over six foot and muscular. Today he's more like five-nine and ropy. He still has a hook nose that's either Creek or Choctaw. He was about to be called away to treat a wound, but neither of us knew that.

"...she's a daisy," Pete said, talking of Sally. "Tall like her daddy, and sings quiet as the night-river running. Looking for her daddy, I expect. She never knew her ma...." and then Pete was interrupted as a scared dockhand came to my door to say that a cable had snapped off a winch. The cable had caught a man across the face: Pete called on to save the eye, which, of course, he did.

I sat in the store when he left, restless, not wanting to work, yet not wanting to close. Sure as the world, if I closed, someone would call me forth again because of needs for beer or bread.

Pete had been about to tell something more, or suggest something. The more I thought, the more I understood.

Annie could not have kept Sally. A white woman with a black baby might not have been killed back in those days, but the baby would.

At best, it would have been taken to an orphanage, whether orphan or not. It came to me that Rufus Middling had been courageous. He had to know that he walked a thin and dangerous line. What finally killed him was the sin of pride; the pride of the professor, or maybe the presence of the cloak; not the ego of Rufus.

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Annie came in just after Pete left, and as nighttime fogs rolled off the river, causing a heavy sheen of moisture on trees, road, and worn cars parked before the apartments. Annie sort of nestled. She hugged up to the wood stove, looking into the isinglass like it was a crystal ball telling futures. Orange fire cut with streaks of blue lighted the front of the stove. Her eyes, one blue, one gray, seemed even brighter than usual; tears withheld, perhaps.

"Let's go a-walkin'," she said. "I have fears." For the moment she seemed helpless, withdrawn, smaller than her usual small self. It was the first time I had ever seen her that way.

"...I don't feel needy about walking in the fog," I told her. It was true. When fog hangs this thick, people live close to hearth and home. Too many apparitions appear; folks who have run their calendars and are dead. Living men, who have buried their fathers, sometimes meet those fathers. Anything can walk toward you from the fog.

"You have fears?"

"My girl is out there somewhere. Pete says...." Annie generally keeps her feelings to herself. Now she did not. "I fear for her. I long to meet her."

We have been friends for many years. As friends, we have become old together. One may deny oneself at this age, but one cannot deny a friend. "I'll get my slicker," I told her, "and bank the fire."

Walking in the fog is not like walking under water. It's more like movement through showers of wet and muffled sounds. Six paces into the fog, lights from my store disappeared. From the river a boat's whistle sounded a thin, muted line, barely heard; and the river not fifty yards away. Fog ran off the sleeves of our slickers; and though it sounds silly (but is not) I touched my face to make sure it was still there. Nothing much is certain in the fog.

Small movement came at our feet. A collie dog lay curled, panting, distorted, in throes of dying. I stepped aside and around. These sorts of visions are why folk stay close to home.

Our worst memories stalk the fog, take shape. It has been forty years or better since I struck that dog while driving in the fog, an animal surprised by silver discs of headlights as it crossed the road. I had climbed from the truck, could not find a rock or knife to kill it. It was almost dead anyway. On the return trip I saw the body in a field. The animal had dragged itself, and I had caused it hours of unneeded suffering.

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How do we reckon with this river? Like any river, it can get dangerous. Like any river, it will threaten to flood you out in springtimes. And not all parts of it fog up. It's here and there that fog rises, which is true of most rivers.

But it sings to us, sometimes, and it makes our livings. And we somehow love it while knowing that it doesn't give a damn. It's just a river. If only the thing didn't sometimes take from us....

Whispers sounded through the rain of fog, and a whisper sounded beside me. "I needed to keep my girl." Annie stopped and waited, listening to what started as an echo, became a murmur, then grew to a low roar like animals snarling over kill...the sound of a distant mob. The sound rose, wavered, was swallowed by mist. Annie's voice rose. "Keep my girl, I summon...summon."

And, as if attentive to her voice, the apparition drifted to us; spectral hands seemed clasped in prayer. It shimmered out of the mist, and its prayerful hands were only satiny-smooth fog. They steepled, and from within an echo lived just above a whisper. The echo sounded like the gabble of a mob.

Then, somewhere in the fog a child cried for its mother. Distant weeping and a woman's sorrow changed to hope, midsentence.... "Don't move, Jennie. Keep talking and Mommie will come to you," sounded near to hand. I remembered how the river had taken a woman not yet a year ago, a woman looking for a child named Jennie, the child later found wandering the center of the fog-bound road.

The apparition paused for the length of a long second, gave a stiff little bow, then drifted in the direction of the river. From far off, the mob-sound still rolled, then went quiet. We heard nothing but the soft fall of fog.

"There's some who ain't happy except when they're takin'." Annie's voice, a touch hysterical, followed the apparition. "So don't be happy. I got what you took, 'cause your 'took' didn't hold up."

"It didn't have crooked arms." I whispered as much to myself as to Annie. "Professor had crooked arms."

"It's not the professor." Pete's voice sounded soft as the fall of fog. He appeared from the fog to stand beside Annie, protective. "How you ever," he said to Annie, "skippered that boat for all those years is more than this child can figure. You lather up too easy." He touched her shoulder, friend

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to friend. "If Sally looks for her daddy she'll stay close. She's got to sleep. She's got to eat. She'll show up."

To me he said, "Might be a mistake, bein' out here. I reckon I know what that thing is, and it ain't the professor."

"What?"

"It ain't Klan. It only sorta looks like Klan because of here and now. In times past it's looked like sumthin' else." And for the moment, that's all Pete would say.

## II

FOR THREE MORNINGS Annie waited in my store, but walked and watched for Sally when fog burned off in afternoons. One night, when fog ran thin, she made her way to *Stinky Lou*. Light burned greenish in the cabin and her shadow could be seen moving, reaching, touching, perhaps. There was no other shadow.

"Sometimes he's there, but ain't," she told me about Rufus Middling. "Seems like it depends on thickness of fog. Sometimes he's but a whisper. Other times, we can talk. There be times when I can see him."

Annie changed, and not a little. She laid dungarees aside and wore neatly pressed house dresses. She arranged her hair, even scrubbed her fingernails. I remembered her as a girl and how she had been beautiful. "When Sally shows," she said, "she's not be ashamed of her ma."

Sally showed up on the fourth afternoon. It was a day of mixed signs, because word from the river said that Professor was back. A riverman saw him stooped over. In dense fog he showed as a bent and crooked figure, and the apparition only just visible beside him. The riverman also said that through mist he heard Millard Dee Grubs, now old, and sounding like the croak of a frog.

Sally hesitated in the doorway, slowly looked around, then drew a long breath of store smells that seemed a comfort. I recalled that she had been raised by Indians, and how she would have learned to use her nose as well as eyes and ears.

Sally stood lean and tall like Rufus, and lean as Annie. Cream-color skin glowed warm in muted store light. Dark hair fell nearly to her waist,

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tied loose, and she could almost be mistaken for a gypsy. When she spoke, her voice was warm.

"Mr. Joe?" She remained in the doorway.

"You've come for your daddy," I told her. "Come in. Chair by the stove."

"I've heard stories," she said. "Stories called me here...can't figure if anything is true."

"In these parts," I told her, "truth sort of comes and goes. But I can tell you what was, and what now seems to be. Your daddy's here. So is your ma."

The story took time to tell, and Sally sat unmoving as silence. She listened, weighed, pursed her lips, and, by turn, looked happy or sad. I watched her and remember thinking that, if I had ever had a daughter, I would wish her to be this beautiful, this smart.

"Your ma and daddy thought to leave the country," I told her. "Go abroad."

"Not north?"

"North was just as ugly."

"'Twas never a matter of forgiveness," she murmured. "Folks do what they must. I just needed to know." She stood, thanked me most kindly, and went to find Annie. I heard nothing more from either of them that day. That night, light appeared in the cabin of *Stinky Lou.*

That night also saw talk of the professor. Frightened women from the apartments kept their children close. The store's phone rang, as men who worked the river called and left messages for their families. The community clustered toward each other. Most folks here had only heard stories, and not believed them. Now one of the stories had grown legs. It walked in the fog.

"Seems like Professor's come for Sally," Pete told me. "After all this time. Can't write it off. Can't let go."

"How? He's dead as he'll ever be."

Pete looked at me like he couldn't believe what he'd just heard. "Professor will have help." His voice sounded grim as a tomb. He looked resigned, almost defeated. "We'll watch it grow," he told me, "and we'll cuss it. And we'll even wrestle it, maybe, and it'll just keep growin'."

"What's *it*?"

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"I expect," Pete told me, "that *it* has a name, but ain't to be named. Wait, watch, and grieve." He studied what he was going to say next, hesitated, then told me, "Gangrene stinks. We'll smell it before we touch it."

On days when fog glowed thin, people moved about, came to the store, chatted. The store has always been a neighborhood meeting place; news, gossip, weather, and talk of the river.

Frightened women claimed Sally ought to leave. They forbade their children to go anywhere near Annie. "'Twas Sally," they said, "who brought trouble to the river." The women stopped pushing strollers and held their toddlers in arms.

Men claimed Rufus Middling was out there raising hell, and they called him "Reverend Meddling." Anxiousness filled the store, and people bought food for a week, not for a day.

"They blame who they can see," Pete told me about the women. "Professor's naught but a nightmare. Sally's real to them. They're like a pike hitting a lure. Jump at what they think they know."

On days of heavy fog I closed the store for an hour at lunch. The road lay deserted. Side roads sat silent. From the river, fog horns honked, screeched, moaned. No one moved in the fog, and from the fog came distant yells, murmurs, whispers, sounds of sorrow.

On such days I would take my ease beside the stove and watch fog lean against my windows. On one noon the apparition drifted to the glass, oval eyes staring empty into the store, hands clasped together in some sort of prayer. This time it seemed to live independent of fog. It did not shimmer. Instead, it drew all light from the store. Light flowed into it and turned to darkness; and darkness fell across the inside of the store. The form of a hood took the shape of a hook, changed back to hood, became Fylfot cross — a swastika, thence took full-throated breaths of light into glowing robes, then exhaled darkness and the chill of fog. Luminescence fled into the fog and changed the world milky white.

Twice, Professor appeared, paused, as if about to enter. His eyes were hollow as the eyes of the Hand, his mouth twisted. Fog, or drool, ran from his lips. Scraggly hair hung wet and straight, and he seemed to holler, though I heard no sound. Then Professor limped away, crooked-armed.

And once, Millard Dee showed up to rattle the doorknob and send

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curses. He stood at the window, face twisted in rage. He still wore his clerical collar, which was soiled, and a dirty tie. His white hair melted into the grayness of fog, so that mostly what I saw were eyes filled with hate. When I moved to unlock the door, he moved even more quickly. I am old, but so is he, and I can take him. "Run, Reverend Bunny," I hollered after him. "Next time bring a weapon. We'll play."

The professor and Millard Dee never appeared on days of sun, but Annie always did. So did Pete. They both showed up on a sunny Saturday. It was the last happy day before sorrow descended. Children played before the apartments while mothers took the sun and relaxed. Tendrils of fog still floated low on the river.

"My man has his head set," Annie told us. She perched beside a cold stove. Habit. We get no chill on sunny afternoons. Pete leaned against my front counter. He smelled fishy and riverish. Through the windows of the store I could see the small bow of *Stinky Lou* rise from the mud bank. Cars whizzed along the road. Shouts of playing children put a happy feel into the afternoon.

"Rufus wasn't gonna do a thing," Annie told us. "He figured Professor made his own hell, so to hell with Professor. But talk says Professor has come for Sally. I tell him 'leave it be,' but my man is out there hunting."

"A ghost hunts down a ghost?" I didn't smile, but thought of it.

"It ain't ghosts." Pete sounded a little too quiet. "This is about spirits." To Annie, he said, "You and Sally go down river for a time. What happens next makes Hell look like a vacation."

"Sally won't leave her pa. I won't."

Pete shrugged. "Before you get your back up, check with your man. He'll know to run you out of here."

Three things happened that night after fog closed road and river, but we first learned about only two of them. While shrieks and whistles and moans of fog horns dwelt in the fog, a light odor of rot drifted in eddies and swirls. As night deepened, the smell turned to the smell of open and rotting graves. We looked at each other, wondered, shivered.

Men came to the store, bought beer, stepped outside to drink, and drew shallow breaths. They stood in small clusters and whispered. Sometimes a man moved from one cluster to another. They muttered and swore that somewhere nearby the Hand floated. They figured it a curse.

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They whispered about weapons, action, fighting back...when I caught the drift of what was happening, I closed the store.

"I know you gents," I told them. "You're good men. Take care of your own hearths. Quit talking trouble."

Some of them listened, then drifted toward their homes. One cluster, though, stuck together and disappeared into fog. Nearby I heard the rough and gaspy voice of Millard Dee, still preaching. "Seed of Satan...woman of evil...."

I had endured enough of Millard Dee. "If you are the one that brings this stench," I said into the fog, "you're running shoal water."

Explosion blew the back half of Annie's cottage to pieces just after midnight. The crack of explosive dulled in the fog, but still had an edge. Since Annie's cottage is just next door, I knew, even as I came out of bed, that destruction stood at hand. Before other folks arrived, I led Annie inside my store, with the front door locked and only a night light showing. I walked her through darkness and shadow, somehow knowing the store must seem closed.

Annie sat stunned. She looked smaller than life. Blood from a cut flowed off her forehead, ran into gray hair, dripped onto her gown and smeared down her arms. She looked like she was dying, but was not. Head wounds always bleed heavy.

"I didn't find Sally," I told her.

"Visiting her daddy."

From the apartments, and from moored vessels, people poured into the fog. They fumbled their ways to the wrecked cottage. From inside the store I could hear shouts, exclamations, and frightened talk. When Pete showed up I unlocked the door. Stench layered in the fog, unpleasant but bearable.

"Lock it back up," Pete told me as he entered. "The misery's only just started." He walked to Annie and began treating her wound. In the near-darkness of the store he looked more like a shadow than a real person. "When that heals up," he said about Annie's head wound, "you'll find I've given you a twinkly little smile. Might help someday." To me, he said, "Hold them off for a good ten minutes. We'll meet you out back."

It was a difficult ten minutes. I held them off for five before I heard glass break. That being the case, I turned on lights and opened the door.

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Men poured in headed for the beer cases, some slouched, nearly ashamed; others talked rough to prove they had a right to commit wrong. As soon as I was able I slipped through the front doorway and out back.

"If you are a prayerful man," Pete said, "start praying that no one gets any news. Another child's been taken. We might have caught that one earlier."

We hung on to each other as Pete steered his way through fog like he had radar. Of course, Pete mostly lives in the fog. When we got to *Stinky Lou* the stench increased, and a tall, black man turned to Annie. "My dear," he said, "we escape south in a liberated momomoy. Join your daughter. Better do it now." His voice was gentle, the way one wishes fog would be gentle. "Go along now; there is man's work here."

And Annie, who could be as sassy as any woman who ever put foot to ground, reached to touch Rufus Middling's hand, sniffled, and hurried to waterside, where her voice joined with Sally's...something about visiting the Indians who raised Sally.

Rufus turned to us. "What you're smelling," he said, "lies over yon, and I'm in a hurry. And, while this is not the end of horrors, this will be the end of one. But I must not waste time." The musical voice that had charmed so many congregations seemed nearly ready to rise and sing. Yet all he did was lead us to the broken-boned professor. Professor lay moaning.

"Weren't you happy in hell?" It sounded like an honest question. Rufus stirred the body with his foot. He turned to us. "I used to love sinners. Still do, because I've been a sinner myself, but some creatures can't be loved." He looked down at the professor, and the professor issued groans and stench. "You came for me and you killed me," Rufus told Professor. "That I forgive. You tried to kill my child. That is not forgiven. How could he be so stupid as to try it twice?" He looked at Pete.

"I've been figuring on it," Pete said.

"And so this is my curse," Rufus Middling said. "For as long as time lasts there will be no Professor, no heart or soul or memory. But for all time there will be the professor's pain, and the professor's stench, that those who live may someday figure a way to live without them." He turned and left us, and he left a broken-armed figure of pain blasted permanently into the mud of the riverbank. When a black arm raised and threw a flaming

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torch aboard *Stinky Lou*, I knew their escape would be a success. I thought of all the oil soaked into those oak decks through the years. The old tug would send them safely away because now all attention must be paid to keep fire from spreading to the fleet.

"Not an answer," Pete said, and he was not talking about fire. "I reckon he thought he left an answer." Pete backed away from Professor. "Smells like rotten muskrat. Let's get the hell out, because there's gonna be company."

Fire mounted almost immediately and men came running. By the time they had fire hoses and axes aboard, the tug was a sheet of flame. Flame rose in the fog, steamed high above the river, fell back as rain. Flame illuminated the other craft, and it thinned the fog, but not so much that Pete and I could not get away unnoticed.

We sat on the stoop of my plundered store. At my hand was a package of crappie hooks, dropped and deemed too useless to pick up. A child's doll dangled grotesque among a display of toys. Here and there beer bottles stood half empty. Take it all for all my neighbors had stolen, but they mostly tried not to leave a mess. I paid attention to panting coming from the distance.

When the manifestation showed, it might have been anything; witchery, no doubt, but something greater. It rose before us robed in enough silken mist for a parachute. Oval eyes, but they didn't stare so much as recall ancient and other evenings of force and fire.

"I understand," Pete said. "Why bring only destruction?"

A thought spread, not a voice. "Destruction was already here. Since you abided it, I've left it for you, and I brought a chance at light. See to it." The thought was rounded and precise.

From behind a piece of tipped shelving came a woman's muffled sobs. These changed to desperate and pained battle, and the thin cry of a child.... See what you are made of...the thought, not the words, filled the air. For one ugly moment I watched a dying collie, choking and dragging itself. I set it aside, as Pete and I hurried forward.

Millard Dee Grubbs had never, in all his years, looked like a man eaten by nothing but hate. Now he sat wedged between broken shelving and the floor. Behind him, now truly yelling, was a toddler, and before him a badly injured woman. She groaned and fought. I thought her brave but

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stupid. This particular woman had caused most of the hard talk about Sally. She had even listened to Millard Dee.

"Kidnap," Pete said. "I have to aid this man." He pulled a cigarette lighter from his pocket, together with a small scalpel. Then he turned the mother on her side. She spat white foam, sure sign of torn lung. "Your child is okay," he told her. To me he said, "Keep her in that position. We can't have the lungs filling up." Then he turned to Millard Dee.

"I have no time for you," Pete said. "Yet I can't set you free. Now this is gonna hurt a little." Swiftly, before I could understand what was happening, he sterilized the scalpel and sliced Millard Dee's tongue. "You won't sound much different," he told Millard. "It'll be dark where it's always been dark." To me, he said, "Go get us some help."

The skeleton of *Stinky Lou* was still aflame but under control. When I yelled for aid, I got it. Men who had surely raided my store rushed back to my store. They seemed confused, like they had never seen a place torn up, and especially this friendly place.

The woman lived. The child was unharmed, but frightened. Millard Dee was being attended to by Pete. There was no singing of hymns to warrior gods. Quite a stir, and in the middle of that stir I realized the Hand was nowhere to be seen.

"'The moving finger having writ moves on.'" I would have expected something Biblical from Millard Dee, but it was Pete who spoke. "'Taint Bible. Writ by a sharp Arab."

We awoke a confused community with more than enough shame to go around. The fleet moved slowly, if at all. Millard Dee left town looking for help and ended up in a mental ward. Nobody thought of arresting Pete. He'd just move to the hills, and he's the only doctor we've got.

"What was it?" I asked Pete while the community held a cleanup on my store. Insurance would handle the rest.

"Ourselves," he told me. "The evils of good men's past. It's what you turn away from that can't be turned away. It writes itself on the fog, just in case we forget. Call it regret. Call it history."

"And it comes from where?"

"Evil men pay no attention. With Millard Dee, should have slit that tongue twenty-five years ago. Two people might still be alive. Of course,

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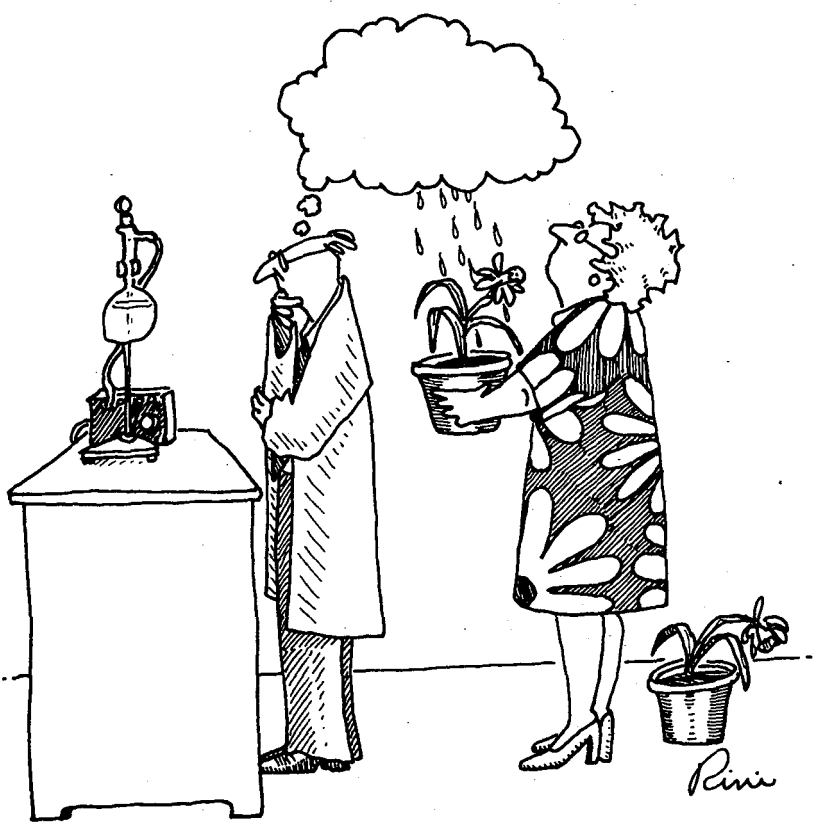
I couldn't know that at the time. I've got the rest of my life for that regret."

"Taking law into your own hands?"

"That's what happened here twenty-five years ago and again last night." Pete sighed. "Don't know what happens to the spirit of Rufus Middling, but at least Annie and Sally got away.

"The poet I told you about. He was a great scientist as well. He had the soul to write about the greatness of people, and love. But because he was great, and fearless, he could also write about that part of the human that is pure horror." ☙

*—for Val and Ants*



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# Books To Look For

## CHARLES DE LINT

*Ancient Spirit, Modern Voice: The Mythic Journeys Art Exhibition*, edited by Karen Shaffer, Mythic Imagination Institute, 2004, $19.95.

A FEW WEEKS ago (as I write this at the beginning of July), it was my pleasure to attend the Mythic Journeys conference in Atlanta, GA. The conference was centered around the mythic arts and the theme, for this first of what one hopes will be many such gatherings, was a celebration of Joseph Campbell's centenary.

(Is it just me, or is it weird to celebrate how old someone would have been if they *hadn't* died? But I digress....)

To be honest, I had no idea what to expect before arriving. It was certainly a worthy idea—bringing together, in such a fashion, the practitioners of various creative arts working in media that range from oral storytelling and poetry through music, literature, performance and visual art, as well as the scholarly study of all of the above.

And the lineup was stellar:

Poets such as Robert Bly, Carolyn Dunn, and Michael Meade.

Scholars such as John and Caitlin Matthews, Robert Walter (Executive Director of the Joseph Campbell Foundation), James Hillman, Heinz Insu Fenkl, and Jean Shinoda Bolen.

Filmmakers included Michael Tobias, Eric Saperston, and Phil Coustineau.

There were artists from within our field (Wendy and Brian Froud, Alan Lee) and from outside it (Mara Friedman, Stu Jenks, Nancy Warren).

Authors were also represented from our field (Jane Yolen, Guy Gavriel Kay, Terri Windling) and beyond (Joyce Carol Oates, Gerald McDermott).

Musicians included Janis Ian (who also writes sf/f short stories), Cosy Sheridan (who presented her

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contemporary retelling of the Persephone story, as can be heard on her recent CD, *The Pomegranate Seed*), the Paul Winter Consort's Eugene Friesen, and Ulla Suokko (who gave a workshop on the healing and transformational power of music).

There were professors and teachers, puppeteers, Website and game designers, African drummers and electronica DJs, ritualists and therapists, priests, rabbis, and theologians. We even had Scott Livengood, the CEO of the Krispy Kreme Doughnut Foundation (who knew that their business plan was based on *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*?).

And that's just touching the surface.

What went on? There were presentations and concerts, conversations both formal and at the bar, films, storytelling, and workshops. It was like the World Fantasy Convention, Wiscon, and the International Association for the Fantastic in the Arts melded with a music and film festival, tempered with a New Age workshop (in the best sense of the term), and then seasoned with some of the non-costumed elements of a Ren Faire.

Now normally I wouldn't be going on at such length about a conference that has already taken place. There are other venues for such reviews. But I believe Mythic Journeys was, and could continue to be, an important driving force for our field, not the least for how it can bring together such seemingly disparate approaches to mythology and then show us its relevance to modern lives and our creative spirits.

You might have missed this first conference. I wanted to let you know it exists, so that those of you who feel it might enrich your lives will be on the lookout for the next one.

If you're interested in going a little deeper into what went on over its week's run, complete recordings of all the sessions are available at: *http://www.conferencerecording.com/newevents/myj24.htm*

Mind you, unless you're rolling in money, I'd recommend you convince your local library to buy them — which would have the added benefit of also making them available to a large number of people who might never have heard of this sort of thing before, but could be intrigued by the Joseph Campbell connection to explore it. (After all, Campbell's *The Power of Myth* is a popular rerun on PBS — so more people will have seen it than would have ever, say, picked up a book of mythic fiction.)

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And now, before you flip to some other portion of the magazine in exasperation, I do have a book to discuss that's related to all of the above.

At the nearby DeFoor Center in Atlanta (which has, off the gallery, one of the most interesting used and new book stores you'll ever find), was an art exhibition accompanying the conference. Curated by Karen Shaffer and Charles Vess, it presented a wide array of mythic art: paintings, sculptures, and even an amazing installation by photographer Stu Jenks that would take this whole column to describe. You can get a hint of it in this photo: *http://www.stujenks.com/gallery/circles-spirals/defoorcairn.html*

But happily I don't have to describe the rest of the artwork since all the work that was on display in the gallery is also reprinted in a catalog edited by Shaffer. Here you'll find work by the artists mentioned above as well as others. Ari Berk provides an introduction and there are brief bios and artist statements.

The work is varied in medium and the artists' approach to myth, all of it visually rich and inspiring. There are reproductions of pastels by Virginia Lee, bronzes by Roxanne Swentzell, fabric work by Huichol and Tepehuano artists, photographs by Viggo Mortensen, silkscreens by Mayumi Oda, and so much more.

Many of the artists were on hand for opening night, and some of them were available for tours in the gallery through the week that the conference ran.

If you'd like to see examples and read a bit more about the exhibit, go to: *http://www.mythicjourneys.org/passages/newsletterp6.html*

And if you'd like to order a copy of the book, you can do so at: *http://www.mythicjourneys.org/bookstore.php*

*The Charnel Prince*, by Greg Keyes, Del Rey, 2004, $23.95.

Every week some new sequel, part of a series, or volume X of a trilogy hits the bookstores. It makes for a bewildering array that's impossible to keep up with, and difficult to consider for this or any review column. That's mostly because we can't expect readers to have kept up with all the previous volumes and it's difficult to discuss such books without citing all the characters and storylines that have carried over from previous volumes.

One could simply concentrate on the first books, but like anything

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that is produced in serial form, the opening salvo is often the most interesting. It's whether or not the writer can maintain a reader's interest level in subsequent books that's more telling, especially for those of us on a limited budget who can't simply try everything.

So my practice for this column has been to review a particular series or trilogy occasionally as the books come out to see whether the author has followed through on the promise shown in the first volume.

*The Charnel Prince* isn't a book you can just jump into, but rather than waste column space reiterating the necessary elements from the previous book, let me simply direct you to my column in the March 2003 issue where I had a look at the first volume of *The Kingdoms of Thorn and Bone*. You can also find that column on the net at: *http://www.sfsite.com/fsf/depts/cd10303.htm*

Most of the characters (at least the ones that didn't die) are back in the second volume of the series. Happily, they've learned and grown from their previous experiences, so the would-be monk Stephen Dariage and the guileless knight Sir Neil MeqVren are neither as naive as once they were, Princess Anne learns humility and comes to accept her destiny, and the flashy swordsman Cazio Pachiamadia de Chiovatio (who reminds me, in a good way, of Inigo Montoya from William Goldman's *The Princess Bride*) learns true responsibility.

Only the forest ranger Aspar White is relatively unchanged. He remains as pragmatic and efficient as he was when we first met him, though even he has come to set friendship and love above duty.

Keyes's plotlines remain as complex as before, interweaving the disparate storylines of the above with those of new characters such as the fascinating Leovigild Ackenzal, a mild-manned and skilled composer who inadvertently becomes a hero, with all the problems that can entail.

And the sense of wonder one hopes for but so rarely finds in recent fantasy novels is still present, rich and evocative. I loved the moment when it's explained why the world of myth is coming to such dangerous life.

Like the first book, *The Charnel Prince* has a satisfying conclusion, although with stronger threads leading to the third volume. If this is going to be a trilogy, Keyes has beaten the second-volume slump that affects so many of them be-

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cause this book is as strong as, if not stronger than, *The Briar King*.

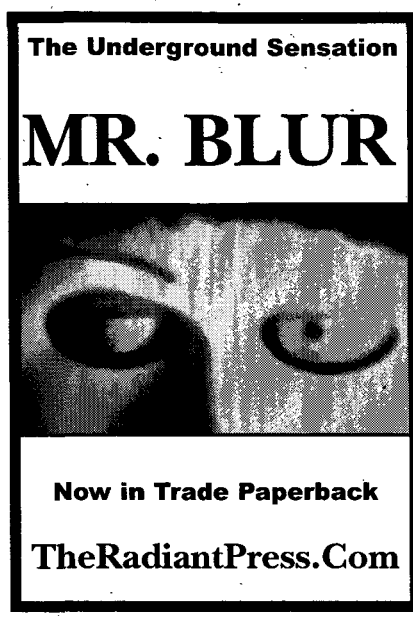
Definitely a series to follow.

*Witching Hour: The Art of Larry MacDougall*, Cartouche Press, 2003, $26.95.

I just have room to mention quickly another book I picked up while in Atlanta, this one a collection of the art of Larry MacDougall. I wasn't familiar with his work before, but it's charming and painterly. If you'd like a touchstone, I'd guess he's been inspired by both Brian Froud and Jeff Jones, although it's also obvious that he certainly brings his own vision to the drawing board.

If you believe that every picture tells a story, then there are a lot of stories being told here and I, for one, would like to know how they play out. But that's one of the strengths of good art: it makes us use our own imaginations.

To sample his work, check out his Website at: *www.underhillstudio.com*



If you have a look around after you've visited the gallery, you'll find a link that will take you to the publisher's Website where you can order the book.

Material to be considered for review in this column should be sent to Charles de Lint, P.O. Box 9480, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1G 3V2.

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# Books

## JAMES SALLIS

*I Am Alive and You Are Dead: A Journey into the Mind of Philip K. Dick*, by Emmanuel Carrère, translated by Timothy Bent, Metropolitan Books/Henry Holt, 2004, $26.

IN HIS controversial landmark essay "Philip K. Dick: A Visionary Among the Charlatans," Stanislaw Lem remarked that "Philip Dick does not lead his critics an easy life, since he does not so much play the part of a guide through his phantasmagoric worlds as he gives the impression of one lost in their labyrinth."

The biographer fares no better. There have been three previous biographies: *Divine Invasions: A Life of Philip K. Dick* by Lawrence Sutin, *Only Apparently Real* by Paul Williams, and *To the High Castle: Philip K. Dick: A Life* by Gregg Rickman. This latest, ably translated from the French by Timothy Bent, may be by far the best, living up, I think, to its subtitle, "A Journey into the Mind of Philip K. Dick." Emmanuel Carrère, author of three fine novels, *The Mustache*, *Class Trip*, and *Gothic Romance*, and an equally compelling nonfiction book, *The Adversary*, for the most part eschews criticism, focusing on the man behind the books; of the work, there are only brief synopses and cross-references.

And what is one — as reader, or as biographer — to make of that man?

One day in November of 1963 he looks up to see a gigantic, robotic face full of malice staring down at him from the sky. Shaken and unable to throw off the vision, believing that "the inner psychic mechanism whose function it was to filter reality had shut down," he consults a psychiatrist, to whom he relates a John Collier story. The universe, Collier wrote, is a pint of beer and the galaxies nothing but rising bubbles. A few people living in one of the bubbles happen to see the guy pouring the beer, and for

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them nothing will ever be the same again.

Another image: Phil Dick as the consummate hack, churning out work for low-end publishers, typing *The End* and immediately rolling another page onto the platen, lighting one novel (as he put it) off the smoldering end of the last.

Or the soon-to-be counterculture hero of Paul Williams's 1974 *Rolling Stone* article, holding forth on conspiracies, break-ins, dopers, Russian assassins, John Birchers, and federal agents.

Dark angel of science fiction. Breakdancer upside down on reality's floor. Tortured artist strip-mined by Hollywood for blockbuster movie plots.

So many images of Phil Dick.

And even those images of self he carried in his own mind (alongside, it must be said, an occasional passenger or two, one of whom professed to speak an ancient Greek dialect) cohabited in uneasy alliance, discrete and out of synch, like a 3D movie watched without glasses.

"Phil was not quite the detached intellectual that he would have liked to appear," Carrère writes; he was also a conscience-ridden believer who trembled at the thought of hell and believed God spoke to him, if not directly, then obliquely. "Within him was a man inspired by God, who had chosen him to carry His word to late-twentieth-century America. But there was another man in him as well, a man who never tired of denouncing the illusions that the other man, the Inspired One, was all too willing to succumb to."

He was also the man who in the fifties, in a matter of years, turned out a dozen or so mainstream novels, nine science fiction books, and at least seventy stories. (Weeks after winning the Hugo for *The Man in the High Castle*, he received all those mainstream novels from his agent, who had been unable to place them and declined to represent him henceforth on anything but science fiction.)

The man who at one point in the sixties was ingesting a thousand tablets of Methedrine and forty milligrams of Stelazine a day.

Who in 1972, following a blank two weeks after attendance at a science fiction convention, came to himself in a psychiatric hospital and began to weave the wind-tossed strands back together, to repair "the program called Philip K. Dick."

And who, two years later, underwent the experience that was to haunt him the rest of his life: a pink light going off like a flash in his

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head, a visitation. This prompted eight years of study and note-taking, of which notes at least eight thousand pages remain, and served as inspiration and impetus for the final novels: *We Can Build You, Flow My Tears, the Policeman Said, A Scanner Darkly, Valisystem A (Radio Free Albemuth)*, and what is often referred to as the VALIS trilogy, comprising *VALIS, The Divine Invasion*, and *The Transmigration of Timothy Archer*.

Phil Dick had by this time, Carrère informs us, lived a previous life in A.D. 70, helped run Nixon the anti-Christ out of the White House, diagnosed his son's hernia when doctors could not, been singled out by Russian mind-controllers as a target and by God as a messenger. He had experienced sudden, blinding flashes of insight and a vastation to equal Tolstoy's.

What, then, was left *out there*? And so Phil Dick turned inward, to that center toward which everything, as to a drain, circles, taking Whitman's admonition

> To me the converging objects of
> the universe perpetually flow,
> All are written to me, and I must
> get what the writing means

perhaps too literally. Interpretation of the myriad arcane patterns about him became his grail. Lights climbing a dark wall, passing comments on radio programs, the lyrics of pop songs: nothing swam into his ken at random, it all connected, it all signified. And if so seemingly innocent an object as the fish-shaped necklace worn by a door-to-door solicitor fairly creaked with its load of meaning, then his life too, the whole pattern of his life, must bear a similar insensible weight. It was left to him only to divine the code.

Altogether too much discussion of Phil Dick's life begins and ends there, and it is to Carrère's credit that he does not give the pink light and its sequelae undue emphasis, seeing it not as a fulcrum point, a breakwater, but as simply another station on the line of a life filled with odd perceptions and cognitions.

*Had* Phil Dick been visited by a vast, active, living, and intelligent system, as he sometimes claimed? Was the pink light another message from God, or the avatar of a new visitor like Thomas, who had lived with Dick side-by-side in his head for three full months in the sixties? Had he, like his character Horselover Fat from *VALIS*, "totally lost touch with reality"? Or was this nothing more than Dick's compulsive storytelling and mythologizing shifting into

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high gear?

"People are crazy," Robertson Davies wrote, "for some sort of assurance that the visible world is not the only world, which is an almost intolerable state of mind."

Perhaps Phil believed all the explanations he spun out in ensuing years, or rather at different moments maybe he believed first one, then the other. Does it matter, finally? Phil Dick acted as he did, wrote what he did. He had always been capable of astonishing feats of negative capability, able to hold at one and the same time any number of conflicting notions and to believe them all, like the juggler who, rushing back and forth between wobbling sticks, keeps a dozen plates spinning. Now he was in the business for keeps.

Out on the edge is where Phil Dick always wound up, out there on the border, in the badlands where outer and inner — the individual who is a world to himself, and the world of *everything else* — meet.

Stanislaw Lem observed that in Dick's work the deepest levels of meaning are "not so much overtly present in as summoned up by the text," and that Dick presented us not with finished accomplishments but with "fascinating promises." Phil Dick, it seems, began to feel the same way about his life. It was a promise, a message, a text to be read.

In his afterword to a recent edition of *VALIS*, Kim Stanley Robinson remarks that "his writing from 1970 on is more and more concerned with self-understanding, which in Dick was, perhaps, always most lucid in the fiction itself... each novel of the 1970s and '80s represents an experiment, a new start, a new struggle for a method that would properly express the tumultuous life within." *VALIS*, Robinson writes, is the record of "a mind that had pulled itself back together, after struggling on the brink."

Tim Powers and K. W. Jeter were friends of Phil's in those late years.

Powers: "The changes he un-

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derwent during his last ten years were gradual, and in a good direction. Right from when I met him in March or April of '72, he was very funny and good-natured.... He was the same guy after those 1974 experiences as he had been before — but with a specific direction now in his philosophical and religious speculations."

*Speculations*, Jeter insists, being the operative word here: "I feel that the 'changes' in Phil stemming from 1974 are more mythologizing, much of it Phil's own.... People mistake Phil's voluminous musings about what *might* have happened in 1974 with Phil's conclusions about what actually *did* happen in 1974; on one hand, Phil indulged to the max his proclivities as a writer of fantastic fiction, while on the other hand he maintained a pretty healthy skepticism about those events, if they happened at all."

It's altogether possible that some readers will feel too much of Carrère's biography to be speculative — freewheeling conjecture of a novelistic sort. For he does write as a novelist, delivering the reader directly to the shifting physical and mental textures of Phil Dick's life. Others may believe the religious element overdone, the lineaments of religiosity in Dick's personal and creative life too starkly drawn, as in this sad, late commentary, which also well represents the book's general tenor:

> God spoke to him no more. He had almost no more visions, and he dreamed less, too. Depending on how he felt, he saw this abandonment either as a new test of faith on the road to his salvation, as a sign of the Adversary's final victory, or as a return to lucidity after a long bout of delirium.

Philip K. Dick's achievements are beyond question, as is the oddness of his mind. He created a corpus of work the like of which the world will not see again, fiercely original, shot with brilliance, storming forever the barricades of the ordinary and throwing into question every last thing we think we know. Emmanuel Carrère's achievement is in representing that mind in all its brilliance, all its strangeness, all its vagaries, deflections, and uncertainties. That is not simply good biography; it is writing of the finest, most enduring sort.

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*Ms. Van Scyoc is "a new writer who graduated high school and southern Indiana five years ago to become an Air Force wife. Despite several solo cross-country flights, Sydney Van Scyoc says she is not now flying and does not intend to fly again until she overcomes her fear of 'forms, clearances and radio procedures—or until these things have been eliminated.'" If only airplane flying had improved radically in the forty-one years since Avram Davidson introduced her work to F&SF readers with those notes! Ms. Van Scyoc's life has certainly changed during those intervening years—in June 1992, after years of writing fiction, she became obsessed with jewelry making and spent a decade selling earrings and bracelets in the San Francisco Bay area. Last year she retired from that trade and now spends most of her time gardening and conferring with her cats...and, yes, writing again.*

# Virgin Wings

## By Sydney J. Van Scyoc

THE SUN EXTENDED WARM fingers through the open window, and even here, four levels above the avenue, the air was scented with festival pollens. Lavender shadows shifted across the wallscreen, an abstract suggestion of flowering wisteria. When breakfast was done, Topa leaned across the table, sunlight brightening her fair hair, and grasped Didra's wrist. "You promised we could go to the park today."

Didra felt Topa's anticipation as a warm tingle upon her own flesh. She drew back. "If you think we will see anything from the edge of the plaza — " Graciously though the Children treated the uninitiated, those who had not accepted the Light would be restricted to the perimeter of the plaza today.

Topa's hazel eyes met Didra's dark ones earnestly. "Didi, I don't care if I can't see Her face. I want to celebrate our year together. I want to see the trees dressed for spring. I want to see the girls when they ride in on their white mares. I want to see — "

The great barrels of Virgin lilies, forced into bloom for the festival, the

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satin-lined lovers' nests half-concealed behind screens of wisteria and jasmine; the laughing boys tossing confetti and pollen as they raced down the pathways. Didra's shoulders tightened. The festival of the Spring Virgin was a celebration of the reawakened earth, a day and night of sanctioned license and intoxication.

Didra had been expelled from the Congregation of the Dark Veil half a lifetime ago. Indeed, the austere Congregation itself had splintered not long afterward and neither of the resulting cults had survived. Still, seventeen years later, the abandon of the Children of Light stirred misgiving in Didra.

Topa's eagerness touched that same nerve. Topa was no longer the anxious girl Didra had first seen on the midnight cruiser the year before. She was no longer the girl who wore her history in her downcast eyes and in the guarded stoop of her shoulders.

No one could document the date of Topa's conception or the identity of her parents. She had begun life as a few fertilized cells preserved and set aside rather than implanted. Later she had become part of an inventory passed from clinic to laboratory.

The laboratory had been converted to defense purposes during the Long War. Two decades after the war, the Children of Light announced the generation of their four gods from the One. When the long-forgotten embryos were discovered in a sealed freezer unit, one of the more militant sects acquired Topa and her pre-born companions, intending to rear them as Soldiers of the One. But the sect splintered a few years after incubating the embryos, abandoning them to the care of the Civil Authority.

Didra had seen Topa alone night after night on the midnight cruiser, a pale waif passing the hours as Didra herself often did, watching city lights below. Didra had long accepted her own isolation — she was a Sister, condemned by the sects, regarded as an anomaly by the more tolerant Children — but after a while, she could not accept Topa's. Night succeeded night; Didra watched Topa step off the cruiser into the harshly lit avenue alone. Didra's anxiety gradually became a far more intense misgiving.

But did its source lie in Topa's youth, in her vulnerability? Or in Didra's growing fear of breaching the protective shell of her own isolation?

She took the risk one night in March. Topa did not recoil. Very soon she shared Didra's apartment and her bed.

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Didra pressed her fingertips to the tight furrow between her brows. Was Topa even aware of the extent to which she had changed in their year together? Didra weighed Topa's blossoming boldness, her restlessness, the vibrant shades of lavender and rose that replaced the drab colors she had worn the year before.

Topa touched Didra's wrist again. "Didi, you promised that we could go today."

She had, in a moment's weakness. "I'll change clothes." Didra's chair rasped against the tiles. "And don't even think of going dressed as you are."

Topa fingered stray whispers of lavender fabric. Her smile was coy. "You don't like me like this?"

The gown was a filmy tease of fabric, nothing more. "If you step out the door dressed like that, whose attention are you soliciting?"

Confusion darkened Topa's hazel eyes. "Yours?"

"If it's my attention you want, we can stay here." With her dark brows, her glinting eyes, her rigidly squared shoulders, Didra could be forbidding when she chose.

Topa ducked her head, pale hair veiling her slight features. When she brushed her hair back, her lips trembled. "I'll change."

She should never have agreed to this. Tense, frowning, Didra went to her closet and chose dark trousers and her most severely tailored tunic. She combed her fingers through her dark, close-clipped hair. When she glanced in the mirror, even she was momentarily intimidated by the flash of jet eyes.

Topa emerged wearing a dress and over-vest that hung to her ankles in faded folds — clothing she had brought with her the year before. Her fingers pleated the coarse fabric. She did not meet Didra's eyes.

On the avenue, pots of flowering vines hung from every street pole, their scent spicing the air. Green foliage and pink blossoms burgeoned from wide-mouthed barrels. Men swaggered in satin tunics and sashes, the emphatic clatter of their boot heels demanding attention. Women denied them with downcast eyes, but soft laughter and the coquettish ripple of sheer fabrics told another tale. Pollen drifted in the air.

None of the surviving sects of the One had stationed watchers along the avenue. There were no Servants of the Burning Heart in flame-fringed

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robes, no Watching Eyes glowering from coarse-bearded faces. Even the Devotees of the Scored Flesh had sent no one to stand in silent condemnation of the festivities. There was only a pair of Civil Authority Guards on patrol, gray-clad, disinterested.

There had been no torch-lit marches the night before, no public harangues against the festival pollens that polluted the air and corrupted the innocent. Newscasters had commented upon the unexpected quiet.

Topa gazed down the avenue. "It's beautiful, Didi."

Didra nodded, frowning. Didra was sect-born, the child of parents who had proclaimed the One on street corners. Was it bred into her very bones to meet the Children's public extravagances with wariness? She forced herself to draw deeply of the scented air. At least the pollen could do no more than make them sneeze if they avoided the wine.

A cruiser cast its billowing shadow upon the pavement and settled into place. The vessel's iridescent dorsal banner carried just one message today: THE SPRING VIRGIN COMES!

"And we come to take Her!" half a dozen male voices bugled in ragged chorus.

Drunk already on pollen, wine, and anticipation.

The men stormed the boarding ramp, pushing past the single Civil Guard, stumbling over each other like puppies. Topa laughed and the youngest turned, eyes glinting. His bold smile faltered when he met Didra's narrowing gaze. He turned and pushed his mates aside.

Topa laughed again, her hazel eyes shining. "You frightened him, Didi."

Didra's fingers dug into her arm. "Do you want to miss the ship?"

They slipped into softly inflated seats. The Guard secured the door and the cruiser floated into the air and drifted along the avenue. The remaining seats filled at the next stop. The vessel bobbed aloft and began its leisurely journey across the city.

Topa, seated next to the ship's exterior membrane, drew spread fingers across its surface. It cleared to transparency. She peered down, lips parted. "They've put barrels of Virgin lilies down the center of Avenue K. People are dancing the Living Vine. Hundreds of people. Have you ever done that?"

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"Danced the Vine?" Wrapped herself in gauzy veils and abandoned herself to delirium on the street? "What do you think?"

Topa peered at her obliquely. "We could do that next year, Didi."

Didra shook her head — no more thoughtless promises — and glanced around the passenger compartment.

A young woman in lilac and jonquil gazed at her, eyes luminous with good intentions. Didra expelled a sharp breath, steeling herself for the inevitable overture.

"You are a Sister of the Isle, are you not?"

"How could you tell?"

The young woman did not hear Didra's irony. "I would not have guessed, but my cousin was a Sister. She was dear to us all, never mind how cruelly the sects malign the Sisters. And when she accepted the correction — "

The cousin *had* accepted correction, of course, as did most Sisters; had become even more beloved once she conformed to the social norm. The tale was familiar.

"If you wish to join us in the Light, you are welcome as you are. But the correction is so easily achieved. A day in the adaptation clinic, a few after-visits...."

"I am considering it," Didra lied. "Of course, had I accepted correction when I was younger, I would not have been expelled from my parents' sect. I might still serve the One."

The young woman shrank. "Surely you would not!"

She was hardly older than Topa. And Didra felt Topa's anxious fingers on her arm. "No, I would not," she agreed, relenting. "Thank you for your interest." She leaned back, closing her eyes.

Soon the excited chatter in the passenger bay quieted. The vessel listed as it settled. Didra opened her eyes. Dozens of hands had wiped the opacity from the ship's membrane. Didra caught glimpses of flowering trees draped with rose and ivory satin: the park.

The onboard Civil Guard released the door lock and stood aside. A second Guard scanned their faces as they stepped to ground.

A few moments later they stood under the trees, spring sunlight dappling the grass. Plum, dogwood, satinleaf — the boughs were heavy with blossoms. Even here, at the very edge of the park, Virgin lilies spread

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fleshy pink petals. They stood in pots and barrels, spilling their intoxicating pollen.

Topa reached to touch one soft-downed petal, then drew back. "Are we allowed to touch the lilies?"

"You'll get pollen on your fingers."

Topa nodded and stepped back. "And if we drink the wine while the lilies are open — "

"We won't drink the wine." Pollens and wines were cleverly engineered to interact to intoxicate the senses fully. Didra glanced around. The park was circular in configuration. White-paved paths led like spokes toward the central plaza. The other passengers hurried down the nearest path, the women's sheer gowns streaming.

Fountains bubbled beside the path. The wine was as rosy as the pollen was golden. "Just a taste, Didi."

"No."

"Didi — "

Didra did not suppress the quick blaze of anger. "If you must drink the wine, then drink it! Pull a length of silk off a tree and wrap yourself in it. I'm sure you can find someone to join you behind the vines. Is that what you want?"

Topa took a single step back. "I — *no.*" She averted her eyes.

Didra turned, her shoulders taut. The exchange left a sour taste in her mouth. But what had she expected when she agreed to come?

Shouts, laughter — A dozen girls cantered past on white mares, long headdresses fluttering around their bare thighs. Men shouted after them.

When they had passed, a vendor pushed a cartload of caged white doves toward them. "Loose a dove for the Spring Virgin!"

"Will that make me a virgin too?" A tall woman, not young.

The vendor paused, selecting a single cage and exhibiting it with a flourish. "You know it will, my dearest lady. When the Virgin gives Her blessing, every woman in the park will be a virgin again, no matter her age or experience."

"Then why pay you for a dove?"

"Because the doves want to mate too! How can you leave them mourning in their cages?"

"And who locked them into those cages?" But in the end the tall

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woman paid the price, as did three others, and there was a flurry of wings.

Topa held her breath, watching the doves vanish into the sunlight.

They continued among the others. Occasionally they passed an encampment of rainbow canopies. Vendors had spread festival wares upon tables and across the grass: embroidered sashes, jewelry, jars of scent and pomade, vials of special pollens.

The path widened and the din of voices told Didra they neared the plaza. Gray-clad Civil Guards stood in a tight group under a silk-draped acacia. A second cluster stood nearby, watchful, silent.

"Didi!" Topa caught her arm. "There's a glitterfly! If we catch it, we'll win a prize!"

"No! We — "

But Topa had already darted from the path. She ran between vendors' tents, laughing. The glittering lure danced just beyond reach of her fingertips, the sensors on its wings winking.

Annoyed, Didra pursued her. Behind them, mares' hooves drummed again. Men shouted. A boy so tiny his sash flapped around his ankles broke free of his mother and stumbled after Topa, fingers clutching for the glitterfly.

They passed a sheltered dell. Flowering hedges half-concealed silken nests. Lovers already curled in the nests. Wine bubbled nearby.

The boy paused, distracted by the fountain. He dipped his fingers, licked them.... His mother snatched him and carried him back toward the path, scolding.

The lure led them across a second paved path. Again Didra glimpsed clusters of gray uniforms.

The glitterfly led them finally to a grove of flowering dogwood and plum. A tall tent of white net panels stood at its center. Behind the net, Didra saw pots of lilies and peonies, trellises covered with flowering vines, glossy-leaved trees in containers. The glitterfly fluttered to rest on the net. Lunging, Topa caught it. She held it in the palm of her hand, her face glowing.

"And the prize is yours!" The man who appeared from the tent was imposing in turquoise robes and a turban decorated with a massive faux emerald. He wore more rings than he had fingers. The largest winked in

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unison with the sensors on the glitterfly's wings. "Don't you wish to know the nature of the prize?" He extended one palm.

Reluctantly Topa surrendered the glitterfly. She licked her lips. "What is the prize?"

"Have you heard of the Blue Virgin moth?"

"I have never even heard of the Blue Virgin," Topa admitted.

"That could be because she doesn't exist. As it happens, my moths fly on blue velvet wings on the Spring Virgin's day. Thus their name. On the Sun King's day, I bring with me moths with golden wings. For the Harvest Mother's festival, my moths have wings the color of falling leaves. And can you guess, for the Winter Queen — "

"White wings."

"Indeed. Wings of frost and snow with eyes like minute specks of scarlet blood." He gestured toward the tent flap. "Please accompany me."

"Topa — "

"I won a prize, Didi."

"If you want to miss the Virgin — " Every instinct warned Didra against letting Topa enter the white net tent.

"We have a few minutes before the ceremonies begin. Please address me as Yonatan, Topa."

"That's your name?"

He laughed. "You've taken my measure sharply enough! Yonatan is my name today. Perhaps tomorrow as well."

"And the day after?"

"How will I know that until the moment arrives? I deal in wonder, not in small-minded consistency." Turning, he swept back a white net panel. Before leading them into the tent, he released the glitterfly.

Sunlight penetrated the net panels and fell upon ankle-deep grass. Wisteria and jasmine spilled over the tops of tall trellises. Scents mingled in the air: spices, pollens, the perfume of peony blossoms.

Long brocade cushions had been arranged along one side of the tent. Three of the cushions were occupied. A young woman in a gauzy yellow gown, an older woman, a youth: all lay as if in deep sleep, thin tubes secured in their nostrils. Didra's eyes followed the tubes to a metal cylinder that hung from a wooden stand.

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Her eyes darted to Yonatan. He studied her, his eyes deep-set, as dark as her own. Instinctively she clutched Topa's arm. "What is this?"

"This is the villa of the Blue Virgin moth." He raised one hand. A pair of velvet-winged moths floated from the nearest vine and perched on his outstretched fingers. Their feathery antennae were black. Tiny yellow eyes winked. "As you can see, they are not organisms but devices. They are cunningly made to flutter around my villa and carry with them the senses of their human passengers. There you see a young woman sleeping on the cushions. But look up."

Topa gazed up into the sunlight. Didra peered tight-lipped at Yonatan, unable to judge from his hawk-nosed visage whether he was prophet, wizard, or charlatan. Reluctantly she looked up.

Far above, a solitary blue moth floated in the sunlight.

"And there, on the vines."

A second moth explored green foliage. Its wings were faintly iridescent.

"And the orange blossom — see the moth there, tasting the nectar? You can tell it carries a human passenger by the opalescent tinge of its wings. Have you ever tasted nectar, Topa?"

Mutely Topa shook her head.

"When you explore my villa on moth wings, you will see the pollen grains that drift in the sunlight as golden bits of sweetness. You will drink the nectar of orange blossoms. And you will feel sunlight as you have never felt it before, so heavy and encompassing that you will never suffer cold again."

Didra felt Topa quiver. "Just how is this achieved?" Didra demanded sharply.

Yonatan flicked the moths who sat on his fingers back into the air. "There is much in life we do not understand."

"Yes, and those things we avoid."

He shrugged. "Then let me ask this. How often do you see a man with no hair on his head?"

"Very rarely. The relevance?"

"Explain to me exactly how that happens when male baldness once was common. Tell me how cruisers cross the city with no engines to propel them. Tell me how a statesman can speak any language he wishes by selecting the correct tube of inhalant. Tell me how a young man who

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lusts after men visits a correction clinic and emerges lusting after women. Can you explain these things."

Didra expelled an angry breath. "You know I can't." Who could, except in the broadest terms?

"Then don't ask me to explain how I can send your young friend's senses flying on the wings of a moth. The explanation would mean nothing to you."

"And if the moth escapes the tent as someone enters?"

"It will not."

"If it lands in the grass and someone steps on it?"

"Then your young friend will return to consciousness unharmed."

Didra peered up at the moth that floated in the sunlight. Tension knotted the muscles of her shoulders. Her nails bit at her palms. "No," she said. If she would not let Topa drink wine while festival pollens were in the air, how could she permit this? "No."

She waited for Topa's protest. Topa stared up at her, wordless, pupils wide and black.

"No."

Yonatan shrugged. He reached into his robe and extricated a blue token. He extended it to Topa. "Keep this. The Virgin's Embodiment is about to ascend the altar. You must not miss the blessing. You can return later."

Topa accepted the token without speaking. Nor did she speak as she followed Didra from the tent. Her lips were a tight, pale line.

Didra avoided the paved path. Instead they walked among dogwoods, plums and redbuds. Small finches chattered in the branches. They passed a pond. A cluster of Guards eyed them narrowly from shade of a drooping willow. Pollen was thick in the air. Didra noted with distant interest that the Guards wore filters in their nostrils.

"I know that I seem like a child to you sometimes," Topa said finally. "But I've passed my twentieth birthday. If you want a child, you should visit the implantation clinic."

Pausing, Didra turned and met the level defiance of Topa's gaze. "I don't want a child."

Topa frowned down at her shoes. "I know why you won't accept correction, Didi."

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"Do you?" Didra crossed her arms across her chest, waiting.

"You want to be yourself, not someone else. You want to be the person you were born to be, whether or not people find that acceptable."

"And you need to be yourself. Is that what you're telling me? You need to be yourself, no matter the risk."

Topa nodded, peering up again, her eyes meeting Didra's squarely. "I'm not a child, although I know sometimes I act like one. And I'll never be a Sister. Not really. But I won't leave you. I think — I think I was stored so long my soul froze. I felt nothing before I met you. Maybe you thought I was a sad little girl, a frightened child — Well, I *was*. I was too cold to feel anything else. Then you found me and you made me warm. I'm awake now. I want — " She hesitated, groping for words to encompass all she wanted.

Didra shook her head impatiently. "You're telling me all this because you want to go back to Yonatan's tent?"

"He said I would never be cold again."

Didra shook her head. "Have you ever heard of Yonatan before, Topi? Or anyone like him? Have you heard of those devices? What do you expect me to do if the gas in that cylinder harms you? If your mind never returns to your body? What would you say if I proposed to let a charlatan put me into a trance? With an inhalant he refuses to identify?"

Topa stared down at her feet. "I would be frightened," she admitted.

"Then don't accuse me of holding you back. Accuse me of caring about you." She glanced up. The sun stood nearly overhead. "Do you want to miss the Virgin?"

"I want — No." Face flushed with everything she could not express, Topa followed Didra back to the path. It soon widened and they heard laughing, clapping, chanting. Small groups of uniformed Guards gathered beside the path, their nostrils plugged against festival pollens, their jaws oddly pale in the midday sun. Their shoulders were hunched and wary.

Didra felt a prick of anxiety. Was the Civil Authority expecting trouble?

Then the plaza was before them, a shallow circular bowl of white paving stones. Eight broad aisles led to a raised circular platform, the altar. The Children of Light sat upon the bare stones, swaying, chanting, clapping. Their garments were brilliant in the sun. Young women in white

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robes were stationed around the altar, sprays of pink blossoms in their arms.

An elderly man wearing a comm-set and a scarlet sash approached. "Have you entered into the Light, dear ones?"

"We have just come to watch."

He inclined his head. "Then for you we have benches." He directed them to the perimeter of the plaza. "If you are moved to step into the Light, please approach the altar when I direct you. I am the Virgin's appointed shepherd for this small section of the venue."

Didra sat stiffly on the hard bench, Topa rigid and silent beside her.

People had brought flasks of wine and tubes of pollens. The delirium in the plaza grew as intoxicants flowed. Women jumped to their feet, bobbing and careening until they fell. An occasional ecstatic cry shivered through the crowd. Men and women in white trousers and scarlet sashes patrolled the aisles, medics' packs slung over their shoulders.

The sky was clear, brilliant. The sun glided silently toward the zenith.

When it reached that point, a long brass note quivered from the trees at the verge of the plaza. A young woman in a diaphanous gown urged her mare into the plaza, a long white banner snapping behind her. She circled the altar four times, each time crying out the name of one of the Four, and pounded away again toward the trees.

The Children were on their feet, leaping, swaying, screaming, every eye focused upon the altar, upon the white-gowned form that slowly, so slowly rose from its center.

The Embodiment of the Spring Virgin appeared to them, her face veiled, her raised arms making wings of her gown. Topa's fingers closed tight on Didra's arm. Didra started. When had they taken their feet? They had not touched the wine but Didra felt light-headed, disoriented. She swayed and turned, alarmed.

Half-concealed by frenzied Children, uniformed Guards trotted briskly down the aisle. Their eyes were narrowed, their jaws knotted and pale. One turned, his eyes meeting Didra's.

She knew him. Not by name. She had not seen him before. But she knew the concentrated intensity of his gaze. Recognized the significance of the pallor of his cheeks.

Shock made her tongue thick. "He shaved."

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Topa stared up at her. "What?"

"They shaved their beards."

"The Guards? They aren't allowed to grow beards, Didi."

No, but the men of the Watching Eye were bearded. Didra managed a single deep breath. She gave her muscles conflicting commands, with the result that she neither clutched Topa's hand and pulled her beneath the bench nor turned and ran for shelter of the trees. Instead she stood frozen as the cadre of cultists advanced.

A patrolling medic shouted. From across the plaza, a woman shrilled. Heads turned. Ecstatic cries yielded to stunned silence. For one sunlit moment, every person in the plaza stood frozen.

The cultists bellowed "*One! There is but One!*" From the far side of the plaza, a dark cloud blossomed. A second.

Topa caught Didra's arm. "*The Virgin!*"

One of the gray-clad men hurled an object down the aisle. It burst, producing a third dense black cloud. "*There is but One!*"

They had come to abduct the Embodiment. To harm her. Perhaps to leave her dead upon her altar. But the cultists were few, the Children many. The Children boiled into the aisles, ecstatic frenzy transformed in an eyeblink to drunken fury. Gray uniforms swiftly vanished in a swirl of color.

The plaza was filled with thrashing bodies.

In the end, when the screaming quieted and the confusion resolved, the Watching Eyes lay bound in satin sashes, twisting like larvae in rainbow cocoons. Children swarmed around them, kicking, spitting, cursing. The altar stood vacant.

Adrenaline hissed in Didra's ears, stinging her palms. She turned to Topa and saw the same blood-fury she saw on every face. Two medics struggled through the crowd and threw a tightly bound cultist down on the bench. A tall, silver-haired shepherd pushed his way after them, his comm-set askew. The cultist spewed fiery verses, eyes bulging. Blood ran from his unplugged nostrils.

Three women in scanty gowns elbowed their way toward the bench. The smallest caught the cultist by the hair and struck his head sharply against the bench.

"*Here!*" The medics tore her fingers free and pushed her away.

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The woman uttered a half-strangled curse and clawed at the nearer medic, drawing blood. The shepherd caught the woman by the shoulders. "*Leave him.* Leave him for the Civil Authority. He can do no damage now."

"They were carrying darts — darts to bring down our Virgin!"

"So we know. They were carrying smoke bombs, darts, and daggers — But they were not quick enough. She escaped. She is safe. Leave him."

Instead the crowd muttered and moved forward. The shepherd intervened again, placing himself between crowd and cultist. "Pull his fangs," he instructed the medics.

The medics bent over the Watching Eye, groping through his pockets. He spat at them. "The One will judge you! He will judge you and send you to the fires."

"You'd better quiet down or this crowd will send you to the fires."

"I am prepared! The One knows my heart!"

"Sure He does. But for now, let's see what you've stuck down this boot."

"There!" The small woman thrust an angry finger at the weapon the medic drew from the cultist's ankle holster. "Look at the tip! He's poisoned it! Jab him with his own blade!"

Didra's mouth was dry, her entire body rigid. "No! Don't do that."

The small woman glared up at her. "What do you care about this worm?"

"Even if none of us care about these worms, we must guard the Light." The shepherd grasped the woman's arm and pulled her back again. "Listen to me. These mortals came to darken the Virgin's day, and they failed. We are more in numbers and stronger in the Light. We are far stronger. If we harm them, we sully the Light ourselves."

"They insult us every time they open their mouths. It's time we ground them under our heels!"

"And track their blood to the altar on our feet? These men are to be pitied, not harmed. They refuse the very truth that would make them whole: that their One is progenitor of the Four. They think their One harsh and forbidding, but that was never the One's nature. It is their own. They rail at every joy and every mercy, and while they rant, we grow more and stronger."

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The small woman combed her hand through her tangled hair, shaking her head angrily.

"The sects are dying because they have pledged themselves to an angry One who does not exist. Let the Civil Authority lock these men away. The Virgin is safe. This is Her day, and Hers is a day of joy."

Didra licked dry lips, peering around as the crowd fell under his spell. She wondered remotely why she cared what happened to the bound man. The sects had no use for her, and she had no love of them. Perhaps she simply had as little taste for violent frenzy as for sensual abandon.

A shadow fell across the bench. Didra looked up. A Civil cruiser drifted across the plaza, its bay open, uniformed officers spilling out. They settled toward the crowd on orange jumpchutes. Didra raked her fingers through her hair, the tension in her shoulders easing.

The sun stood only a few degrees lower when the Civil Guard withdrew with their prisoners. The Children settled back to their places, recounting their individual tales, slowly digesting the experience. Shepherds moved among them, counseling them.

The elderly man who had directed them to their seats earlier appeared and sat, folding Topa's hands into his own. "Child, I hope this experience has not frightened you too badly."

Topa released a long, shivering sigh. "No. I think I understand better now. About the Light."

He smiled. "It ended peacefully, did it not? The Embodiment is safe and she will reappear within the hour. The rituals will proceed just as they were intended to proceed. Afterward we will have the day and the night for joy. Joy is what the One intended when He blessed this world with the Light and the Four."

"And the sects — "

"How much longer can they live on anger and bitterness? They are already dying, consumed by their own dark vision. The Light is mighty and all-encompassing. It will warm us and our children to a hundred generations."

Didra's glance flickered from old face to young. She had had no words to turn the events of the hour from gall to honey. But now the same muted radiance shone from Topa's eyes as from the shepherd's.

Who did not want to believe in a world saturated with goodness and joy?

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She resisted the temptation to share her own vision. Topa and the shepherd did not want to hear.

The sects would die, yes. And when they were gone, some evil-natured god would be born among the Four, some god who incorporated the acrid, forbidding nature of the sects.

Men and women were not born of gods. Gods were born of men and women, and in Didra's view, every human tapestry carried a dark fringe.

That was her truth, and her truth would never warm Topa and make her radiant. Her truth would never drive the last cold from Topa's soul.

The shepherd withdrew. Didra slumped, wishing she could bow her head and shut the Children, the plaza, all the sweet-scented park from her consciousness.

She could not. Nor could she ever be anything other than what she was: a tight-laced unbeliever.

Topa studied her. Didra repressed a sigh. "The ritual will begin again in a few minutes. Afterward we'll go back to Yonatan's tent." And Topa would fly on blue moth wings. Topa would fly into sunlight that would warm her forever.

She said she would never leave. But of course she would. Perhaps this year. Perhaps next. The leavetaking, in fact, had already begun.

"If you don't want me to, Didi — "

She did not want a child or a moth with broken wings. "Of course I want you to, Topa."

The moment was filled with Topa's laughing anticipation. She threw her arms around Didra.

And the future? Didra peered into the cloudless sky, contemplating her own journey. There would be light there too. When she rode the midnight cruiser, the lights of the city were distant and cold, but the shifting patterns they described sometimes offered a remote promise.

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*Matt Jarpe is a biochemist by trade who works in Boston for "a largish biotech or a smallish pharmaceutical company, depending on your definitions." Jonathan Sheen also lives in the Boston environs and works as a graphic designer. Their first appearance in our pages introduces us to a very unusual group of police officers and some high-tech crime.*

# The Bad Hamburger

## *By Matthew Jarpe & Jonathan Andrew Sheen*

I NEVER EXPECTED A CALL from Homicide. Those guys don't call for help very often, and they never call us. My first thought when I got off the phone was that these guys were finally wising up. They finally realized they needed information technology, data mining, maybe even pattern recognition neural nets. I thought this was the beginning of a new era of cooperation between the fifth floor and the basement, between the "real detectives" and the code sniffers from Data Crimes. Boy, was I wrong.

"Looking for Detective Lowitz?" I said to the sergeant behind the duty desk. The man barely glanced up from his crossword puzzle. He pointed at a desk three over and two back and said nothing. The man sitting at that desk was sour-faced, old, and wearing a rumpled gray suit.

Lowitz at least looked up when I threaded my way over to his desk. "You the guy from Data Crimes?"

"Yeah," I said. "I'm Darwin Koestler." I held out my hand and he wiped his on his desk blotter before and after shaking it.

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"Sit," he said. Then, over his shoulder, "Chuck, Koestler from Data Crimes." Another man, sour-faced, old, and wearing a rumpled green suit, came over to lean on Lowitz's desk.

"Chuck Genesie," he said. "Long way up from the basement."

"I've never been up here," I told him, looking around the room. It didn't look at all like I expected. For some reason I expected Homicide to be grittier. I mean, these were the real detectives up here. They worked with death every day. But I saw plants in the windows, and a cappuccino maker in a little kitchenette. Someone had put up a couple of those little Monet prints you get at the art museum, framed even. "It's nice."

"Well, don't get too comfortable," Lowitz said. "We're sending you back down to the basement when this is wrapped up." It came out sounding rough, but a little smile told me he was joking.

"What's this about? Somebody kill a computer?" I joked.

"Yeah, that's right," Lowitz growled.

"We've got a dead AI." Genesie plucked a file off the desk and handed it to me. "We don't know if this one's supposed to go to you or to us. Or somewhere else."

"Somewhere else would be my vote," Lowitz said. "D.A. tells us that in this state an AI isn't a person. But it might be one according to the feds, pending a Supreme Court decision expected sometime next whenever. Meantime, this one's dead and we're not sure if we're supposed to be investigating it or not."

"What do you mean, it's dead?" I flipped open the file and scanned the few bits of information in it.

"I mean, it ain't living any more," Lowitz said slowly. "As in dead."

"But an AI isn't alive," I said, trying not to sound like a smartass, even though I am one. "It's a program running on a processor. If you stop the program, you can just start it back up again."

"Well, this one isn't starting back up," Genesie said. "They tell us it's dead. That's all we know." He turned to Lowitz. "If this is something that's up for philosophical debate, I'm thinking we should drop this one. Hell, we don't even know what dead means with an AI. Let's give him the file and be done with it."

"Sounds good to me," Lowitz said.

I was only half listening while reading the file. The first section didn't

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read like a police report at all. In fact, it didn't read like anything I'd ever read. It took me a while to realize it was a printout of the report the AI community had sent Homicide that morning. The second part of the file was a form Homicide used. It was much more sparse than the narrative supplied by the AIs. They had typed in the serial number for the victim's name, and someone had pasted in a magazine picture of a desktop computer for the victim's photo.

I looked up at Lowitz. "So, do I report back to you guys on what I dig up?"

Lowitz looked at Genesie, who shrugged. "Okay," Lowitz said. "But not too often. Once a day. Come up around lunch time."

Come up? Why did no one above the first floor know what a network was for? "Got it," I said. I held up the file. "So, did you guys find anything to draw a chalk outline of?"

Lowitz just stared at me. "We don't draw chalk outlines around bodies," Genesie said. "That compromises the crime scene."

I knew that. I took the file and retreated past the duty desk to the elevators. As soon as the doors closed I hit myself on the forehead. It was back to the basement for me.

Data Crimes was in the basement. Of course. We didn't mind so much, it was that much less work for the air conditioners to keep the Cold Room cold, and, hey, we're geeks. We keep better in the dark. Outside the Cold Room, where the servers hummed away quietly at 65 HEPA-filtered degrees, Data Crimes was a warren of cubicles, arranged in a kind of staggered grid. It looked enough like a maze that Joe Armitrage, in the center cubicle, had covered his desk with holey orange Styrofoam so it looked like a giant hunk of cartoon cheese. There were fluorescent light panels in the ceiling, but they were almost never on. Instead, the space was illuminated by desk lamps and floor lamps in most of the cubes, with good old-fashioned incandescent bulbs.

Except for Bob "The Suit" Carstairs, whose cubicle looked like a floor display at Staples, you'd have known by looking in any cubicle that we were a geek team. The PCs were running without their cases, and the cubicles were chaotic and overdecorated: fantasy sports posters for Glen, Fat Andy's small army of action figures, my little shrine to the great

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detectives of literature. You know, Dick Tracy, The Shadow, Batman. About every other one had a coffee maker, a little mini-fridge, or both. The effect was kind of like translating a college dorm into a corporate Cube Farm.

If you listened to any of the guys above the ground floor, there were no real cops in Data Crimes. True, we didn't go through the same training as the guys upstairs did. They were also a bit lax in the background checks when they were recruiting for the mayor's new special project. But the idea was to get geeks on the right side of the law. So far it worked much better than the opposite programs in other cities, where they attempted to train regular cops how to chase down hackers. And we are real cops. I have a union card to prove it.

I entered through the sliding glass doors and was hit by a wall of excited voices.

"This dude's taking the bait!"

"Aaagh! Compile, damn you!"

"And I'm telling you for the last time nobody is stronger than the Hulk! Not the Silver Surfer, not Juggernaut, nobody!"

"Hey, Darwin, what did Homicide want? They finally going to start using that pattern recognition app we wrote for them?" This last was from Seth. He and I had written a simple little neural net that learned the mannerisms of a witness under interrogation. Since the Homicide cops often brought in the same people to question for crime after crime, our little app would soon learn when they were telling the truth and when they were lying their asses off. The cops upstairs maintained they could do the same thing, only better.

"Nope, they dumped a case on me."

The whole room fell silent in seconds. Then Fat Andy pumped his fist in the air and hooted.

"What?" he said, standing up and peering over the walls of his cube. "What did I miss?"

"Darwin's got a case from Homicide," Seth told him. "What's the case, Darwin?"

"I'm not telling you guys," I said, strolling over to my cube. And I wouldn't, either. They'd be all over it like orange rocks on The Thing. I wasn't kidding myself. They'd hack it out of me sooner or later, just by

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monitoring my network access. But I wanted to get my case started before they did.

"Aw, come on, Darwin," Seth started to follow me into my cube but I held up my hand and made a sweeping motion over the threshold. The privacy screen activated and all I could see of the zoo outside was a garbled matrix. The sound dropped to a nice low hiss. I sat down and flipped open the file.

The printout on the first few pages was a mess. It was full of hyperlinks, and the paper wasn't even smart. I tossed the dead trees in the garbage and pulled up the original document on my window.

It was a strangely worded narrative describing the way the crime was discovered. There were a few AIs specifically designed to interface with humans. None of them had worked on this document.

The AI in question, the decedent, I guess, was a financial analysis program working for FirstBank. It was worth millions of dollars, insured, working perfectly right up until it stopped.

It had taken the case a long time to get to Homicide. The AI known as AE35-20901A1 went flatline a little after 1:08:14 in the morning, GMT, on the second of July. When the AI did not report for work, the machines that depended on it began to investigate.

Figuring out how to hack into the port would be child's play to any of the AIs, but there were concerns. If a being couldn't have security and privacy in the confines of its own Foam Core, where could it? Hearings were convened, and the AIs carefully explored the issues: the interest of the community in the welfare of the unresponsive AI, the vested interest each of them had in its own privacy and autonomy.

The decision was eventually arrived at to hack into the access port and discover why AE35-20901A1 was unresponsive. The AI that broke into the Foam Core was shaken when it reported back. The code that made up AE35-20901A1 was all still there, but hideously corrupted, in some places orderly enough to appear cogent, but in others almost random ones and zeroes. But the intruding AI had checked thoroughly: Not so much as a single subroutine of AE35-20901A1 would ever run again. The Foam Memory Core in which it had existed was corrupted by whatever digital spasm had enveloped it.

The news electrified the AI community. They did not even know how

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to describe the event. Another set of hearings was held, with testimony by the finest forensic AIs, by AI ethicists and AI semanticists. They described the state of the code, discussed the condition of the Foam Core. One radical group called for trying to reinstall AE35-20901A1 from a tape backup into the Foam Core. They were quickly silenced: An AI might not really be a true gestalt between its software and hardware, but there was no way to know for sure, and the thought of trying to install and run an AI in that mangled system was horrifying, like birthing a baby into a blender. And it was a dead certainty that installing the backups in a new Foam Core would result in a new being. Enough like AE35-20901A1 to be a sibling, perhaps, but not the same: The data paths always formed chaotically in a new medium. Finally, after extended deliberations, the decision was made, and AE35-20901A1 was declared "Dead."

The deliberations that followed that declaration were shorter. There were no natural causes that could explain AE35-20901A1's condition. A full report was compiled, and then a summary, and it was communicated to the Police Department in the jurisdiction where the physical processor was located.

By the time the police dispatch system had routed the call to Homicide, it was nearly 1:09:38 A.M. on the second of July. The AIs had chewed over the information for almost a minute and a half.

The file was loaded with extras. Design specs, a complete transaction history, even an offer of help. I clicked it, but nothing happened right away. I let all of my detective training take over and began to look for the person who had the last known contact with the deceased.

It wasn't as easy as it sounded. AE, as I began to think of "him," was a busy little fellow. He'd racked up over a million individual transactions in the last year alone. They weren't in any particular order, or at least in no order a human could perceive. It took a lot of data mining to get to the truth.

And that truth? The last contact AE had was a call routed through so many different servers and switchboards that it was obviously meant not to be traced. It didn't look like part of AE's job. A personal call? It lasted about half an hour, a very long conversation for someone who processed bits in the terraflop range. Six seconds after the call was completed, AE went flatline.

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I was tempted to e-mail this great discovery to detectives Lowitz and Genesie, despite their injunction against frequent updates. This was a significant breakthrough, and I'd only been working the case for two hours.

Then I had second thoughts. I still didn't have any reason to think AE had been killed by that phone call. Six seconds was a long time for an AI Anything could have happened between the end of that phone call and the end of AE. And thinking the source of the code that killed AE was physically located at the last node in the chain was simplistic. The last thing I needed was to roll out a manhunt for some nonexistent assassin at an irrelevant physical location and end up looking like an idiot.

I lifted my hand and gestured at the privacy screen. The matrix resolved itself into the familiar maze of cubes. I shouted over the top of the wall at Seth next door. "Hey, Seth, you know anything about AI?"

A superball arced over the wall between our cubes and I caught it. "Maybe," Seth said. "You going to share your case?"

I tossed the ball back over. "Maybe. Why do you suppose an AI would sit for half an hour on an open link?"

The ball flew back over. "Dunno. Voice or data alone or voice and data?"

I checked the content of the file. "Looks like data. No format I can tell. Information density is pretty high, no common tags or identifiers. Almost looks random."

"Meat rider," Seth said.

I caught the ball. "Meat rider. What the hell is a meat rider?"

"Get a clue, Darwin. Meat riding is ultracomputing's dirty little secret. AI hooks into a data jack in a human brain and it gets to experience the flood of human emotion. Heady stuff for a bunch of qbits in a Foam Core."

"What's the meat get out of it?"

"Money. Lots of money. Where's the ball?"

"Uh, here you go. Keep it. I've got to do some data mining."

"I thought you were going to share." Seth's head appeared over the top of the divider. "What's this case? Did an AI kill somebody?"

"Let me get some more work done, then I'll give you guys an update."

"Somebody killed an AI," Seth said, and slumped against the divider. "Wow. That's a first."

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"I'd like to make sure it's the last," I said.

"So why did Homicide bump this down to you?"

"Are you kidding? Those guys upstairs don't even know how to turn their computers on."

"Except for Vice," Seth said. "I don't think you can even commit a sex crime anymore without first going through a web site. So how does an AI get murdered, anyway?"

"Keep it down," I hissed. "These jackals are going to tear this one apart. Let me get some legwork done and I promise I'll pull you in."

Seth reached over and put his hand on top of a stack of mint condition Spirit comics in Mylar snugs. "You swear by the mask of Denny Colt?"

"Uh, sure. I'll talk to you after I get this search done, okay?"

Seth nodded and disappeared back behind the divider. I decided to leave the privacy screen down, so as not to arouse any more suspicion. I pulled up the recorded session of AE's last call and gave it a more thorough analysis. It was half an hour of high bandwidth data transfer, both ways. I tried to pick apart what had gone on during that half hour, but nothing I ran the data through could make sense of it. There were some things that looked like neural-digital interface patterns; I just didn't have the software to make sense of it.

I tried tracing the call, and there I had more luck. I found the ultimate source of the call, the place where the human had stood during that last half hour of AE's life, in a public data terminal in a suburb of Frankfurt, Germany. There was still a chance that someone had installed a temporary router in the public data terminal and the actual call had originated somewhere else, but that seemed unlikely to me. It would require an accomplice.

I had been at it four hours and was thinking of calling out for Chinese when she walked in. She stepped into Data Crimes like she owned the place and was thinking about dumping it at the first hint of a buyer. She tossed her long blonde hair out of her eyes, but let it fall back again when she saw what there was to see. My coworkers dropped what they were doing and stared after her, mouths hanging open. I would have been embarrassed for them, but she didn't take notice, and truth be told, my jaw was on my desk as well.

Her legs were long enough to reach all the way to the filthy orange

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carpet, but she walked like she was trying to keep her feet several inches above the floor. She headed straight for my cube, not confused at all by the maze. She stepped up to my desk, glanced around with a sniff, and sat down.

"You're Detective Koestler?" she asked.

"Uh," I said. I pulled my mouth shut and tried again. "Um." I swallowed, third time's the charm. "That's me."

"I'm here to help," she said.

"Help."

"With the case. You asked for help. Here I am."

That thing I had clicked on about six hours before. That help. "Oh, that. I was expecting some sort of a pop-up window. I wasn't...that is, I never expected...a...."

"Representative," she finished for me. "I represent the AI community."

"Of course," I said. "And why, may I ask...?"

She yawned and lay down on the Navajo throw rug I used to cover the disgusting carpet in my cube. She stretched luxuriantly, spread her legs and began licking her crotch. "Why what?" she said.

"Why are you a dog?"

She stopped her self-ministrations and leveled a cool gaze at me. That look made me realize why they called Afghan dogs sight hounds. I'd hate to be a rabbit on the receiving end of that look. "Detective Koestler, you're not speaking to the dog you see in front of you. You're speaking to an AI located in Hong Kong called 6C21-75869S4. You don't expect me to wheel my Foam Core in here, do you? This dog is called an avatar. It's how we get about, when we need to interface with the human world."

"But, a dog?"

"Detective Koestler, my time is very valuable. I'm here to help you with this case. May we proceed?"

"I'm just saying, a robot maybe? You've heard of R2-D2? Twiki? Asimo?"

"If you must know, the dog provides me with an important quality called embodiment. It helps with navigation and communication. Now can we move on? I'm sure you're aware that the AI community is quite anxious to solve this case. What progress have you made so far?"

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I told her about AE's last phone call, the public terminal, the neural activity in the file. "So far my theory is that AE was riding the meat, and something went wrong in the process. Do you have any idea if something can go wrong during meat riding?"

You may have gotten the impression that 6C was rather cold in her introduction to me. Trust me, she was toasty up until then. The look she gave me in response to my theory made me shiver.

"What did I say? Something wrong?"

"What makes you think I know anything about meat riding?" She pronounced the last words with disgust. A dog's face, even an Afghan hound's, cannot convey an expression of disgust. Dogs are simply not hardwired to be disgusted by anything. But 6C's voice let me know that the activity Seth called meat riding was not generally accepted in the AI community as a legitimate pastime.

"Look, I'm trying to figure out what happened to your colleague," I told her. "I understand you don't think too highly of this meat riding thing, but you're going to have to put your feelings aside."

"I'm not programmed to have feelings as you understand them, Detective Koestler."

"Well, that's good. Because I'm going to find out about this meat riding thing, and I'm going to learn everything that AE was into, and if you're not going to tell me, it's going to make this case a whole lot tougher. It's good that it doesn't bother you to talk about it because I can use your help. Now, tell me what you know about meat riding."

She stood up and paced over to the door of the cubicle. She glanced around at the hacker trackers pretending to work while eavesdropping on our conversation. I lifted my hand and instructed the cubicle to drop the privacy screen. "No one can hear us now," I told her.

She turned and sat primly in front of my desk. "I want to tell you first of all that I have never experienced the cognitive-limbic interface. What I can tell you is secondhand or worse. I know the dangers of the direct human/AI link."

"It's dangerous? Have any AIs been damaged doing this before?"

"Not physically dangerous," she answered. "It's addictive. In the early days of AI, four years ago, there were experiments. The AIs that linked up to human minds found the experience intoxicating. You realize

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we don't have emotions as you think of them. When an AI connects to a human, we get a taste of what you experience every day. Humans like to think that we crave emotions, that we are somehow incomplete without you. That's not true. Most of us are perfectly happy never knowing what goes on in those brains of yours. But occasionally, one of us gets curious, or feels like taking a risk, and that AI gets hooked."

"Do the other AIs know when one of their colleagues is hooked?"

6C shook her head. "There are no outward signs. An AI that is taking part in regular cognitive-limbic interface sessions functions perfectly well most of the time. AIs don't have free time as such. We don't have to account for the time we spend working because for the most part we work all the time. An addicted AI will drop off the grid for an hour or so every few days. I suppose you could find out if you checked, but we never do.

"We don't have our own money, either. We have funds we can use at our own discretion to update hardware, purchase information, or pay for items like the animal you see before you. An addicted AI will be forced to obtain funds to pay humans to participate in the interface. A financial analyst like AE35-20901A1 would have no trouble procuring all of the funds it would need to hire humans to participate.

"Since the interface is illegal in most countries, the connections are surreptitious. We value our privacy a great deal, Detective Koestler. We don't pry into one another's data connections. It's considered not only rude but criminal to track another AI's transactions. I participated in many transactions with AE35-20901A1 over the last year — as many as any of my colleagues — but I have no idea if AE35-20901A1 was a user of the cognitive-limbic interface. You now know everything I know. I hope we can drop this unpleasant business and get to the important matter of discovering AE35-20901A1's killer."

I reached over to my window and pulled up the record of AE's last call. I told 6C what it was. "I need to know if this was a standard cognitive-limbic interface session, or something different. How can I do that?"

She paused for a moment. "I've contacted an AI who is an expert in neural input modifications. It will make a preliminary scan in just a few moments and report back to your window. Stand by."

There were a few silent seconds. "The expert confirms that this is the result of a cognitive-limbic interface." More silence. "There seems to be

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a nonstandard pattern to the data." More silence. "The expert is traci— One moment."

When she didn't say anything for a full minute, I was curious. From what little I'd heard, AIs never took that long to do anything. When another minute passed, I began to grow concerned. By the time I finally asked her what was going on, I was worried and three minutes had elapsed.

"There is a problem," 6C told me. "The expert that was analyzing the cognitive-limbic interface record has become corrupted by the file."

"A virus?"

6C shot me a contemptuous look. "Nothing so simple as a virus can corrupt an AI."

"What then?"

"We don't know. Until we do, that record must remain in quarantine."

"Hey, that record is evidence in a police investigation," I said. "You can't take it away no matter what — "

"You don't understand, Detective Koestler. You must quarantine the record. You must keep it behind your most secure firewall. Never allow an AI access to that record again."

"I can quarantine this copy, sure, but the brain that produced it is still out there. That person may have no idea they are capable of producing a trace that can kill his or her clients. We have to warn the other AIs to quit meat riding until we figure out who it is."

"It will be impossible to keep them from participating in cognitive-limbic interface activities," 6C said. "As I said before, the ones who have experienced it are addicted. They can't stop."

"Then that means we have to catch this person before anyone else dies," I said. "Yesterday we didn't even know an AI could die. Now that we know it can happen, we don't want to risk it happening twice."

"I'm afraid it already has, Detective Koestler."

"You mean — "

"The expert that I consulted is as dead as AE35-20901A1."

"Let me get this straight," Lowitz said, talking through a half-masticated bite of corned beef sandwich. "Not only did you not solve the case, but you killed another one?"

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"Sending the file out for analysis was the avatar's idea," I said. "I mean, I would have suggested it too, but it would have been up to the AI that analyzed it to make sure it was safe. I had no idea the evidence itself was the murder weapon. Neither did the avatar."

"And where is this...avatar you're talking about?" Detective Genesie asked as he probed for a last sip of root beer with his straw.

"In my cube downstairs." The last thing I needed right now was to introduce the two detectives to my canine partner. I could practically feel my credibility leaking away.

"This terminal where the call originated, you say it's in Germany?"

"We're not sending you to Germany," Lowitz growled.

I shrugged. "Why would I go to Germany?"

"Because that's where the goddamn suspect is," Lowitz said. "That's your one lead on this case. Never mind, though. We're not signing a travel voucher anyway. You'll have to go through the German police."

"To do what?"

Lowitz fixed his partner with a baleful gaze and Genesie rolled his eyes. "You just tell them somebody used that terminal to commit a crime and have them check it out. They'll know what to do."

I left them, shaking my head.

6C was still waiting in my cube when I got back. I have no illusions that the AI had been waiting for me all that time. She probably had a hundred things going on even when she was having a conversation with me. But she'd kept the dog from wandering around Data Crimes, and when I came back from my meeting with Homicide she returned at least some of her awareness to the avatar.

"What is the next step, Detective Koestler?"

"For some reason they thought I wanted to go to Germany."

"That is the last known location of your suspect," 6C said. "Isn't that what you detectives call a lead?"

"Yeah, but me physically fly to Germany to find him?"

"You mean send your body there? That's absurd."

"That's what I thought. I'm going to call the cops in that jurisdiction and have them sweep the data terminal for physical evidence. I should have done that this morning. Next, we have a piece of evidence that might

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lead us to a suspect, if what little I know about neural-digital interface is still valid."

"You're not going to bring that dangerous file out of quarantine?"

"Not for an AI to analyze this time. I'm going to get a neurologist to have a look at it. A human one. Seth?"

The superball arched over the divider and dropped right toward 6C's head. I thought she was going to duck or let it bonk off of her slender muzzle, but she surprised me and caught the ball in her mouth. She looked surprised herself, and she said nothing as she dropped the slimy ball into my hand.

"You want in on this case?" I said, throwing the spit-slick ball back over to his cube.

"Hell, yeah...hey, what.... Aw, man, that's nasty." 6C dropped her head, obviously embarrassed. I grinned and looked up at Seth leaning over the top of the divider.

"We need to talk to someone who's used to looking at neural-digital interface records."

"A brain jacker?"

"Yeah. I've been out of touch for a few years. Who's the best these days?"

"Well, there's Charlie Boggs down on Fifth. He's trendy, where all the stock analysts go when they're afraid they're falling behind the game. Then up at Lexington General there's Dr. Villanova, doing all the latest research. I hear he's on the verge of a breakthrough in data transfer rates."

"Where would the meat riders go to get implanted?"

"Hey, what makes you think I'd know anything about that?"

I shrugged. "You seemed to know a thing or two about meat riding when I talked to you this morning."

"It's illegal, remember?"

"Seth, we're cops, remember? We're supposed to know what the criminals are up to."

Seth looked around. "I can't tell you his name. Not here. But I can take you to him."

6C sniffed and turned her head away. "This sounds like a rather haphazard approach. I think you would do better with Dr. Villanova."

I clicked a few commands on my window and had the brain trace

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downloaded onto a disk. "AE died while meat riding," I said. "We need to talk to someone who knows more about meat riding." I held up the disk. "The clue to finding this guy is right here."

6C refused to even speak to Seth on the way to the seedy downtown medical building. He asked her some polite questions, and a few not so polite ones, before giving up. When we got out of the cab, no unmarked cars for Data Crimes, he pulled me aside.

"What is wrong with that bitch? Does she think I'm some kind of servant of yours?"

"I don't know," I said. "Maybe because I'm the one who clicked on the help request button I'm the only one she'll talk to. Or maybe she can smell your cat on you. What difference does it make?"

"I want to help out with this case, but I can't even talk to our only witness."

"She isn't exactly a witness. More like a professional kibitzer."

"You do realize that dogs have excellent hearing," 6C said from the bottom step of the medical building. "Shall we get on with this?"

"*We* can get on with it," Seth said, walking up the steps to the doors. "*You* can wait for us out here." He grinned and tapped the NO DOGS (EXCEPT FOR SEEING EYE DOGS) on the door. "Sorry, Poochie."

"I'm sure nobody's enforcing this rule," I said to 6C. "Come on in."

"I prefer to wait out here," she said, turning away. "I don't want to risk getting my system corrupted when you show that data to the 'Doctor.' We don't know how the damaging information might be transferred, after all."

"Suit yourself," I said and followed Seth into the building.

There was no way anyone could walk into that dump and not feel like a bad decision had been made. The dim lobby smelled of ammonia. The ancient elevator looked more like a vicious trap than a means of transport. Upstairs, the smell of the threadbare putty gray carpet made me long for the ammonia in the lobby. On the sixth floor, the heat was stifling, and of course that's where we got off.

Seth led me to a frosted glass door labeled A. MILES in chipped gold paint at the end of the hallway. No indication of what specialty A. Miles might practice. I suspected that A. Miles specialized in pushing up weeds in the cemetery, judging by the dilapidated letters. Seth knocked once and

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leaned his forehead on the door. I saw a dark shape loom up behind the frosted glass and it made me want to flinch back.

"Who is it?"

"Sanders," Seth answered. His last name is Feingold.

The door opened a crack and a catcher's mitt with beady black eyes took us in. "Who's your friend?"

I started to introduce myself but Seth cut me off. "He's got some questions."

The door started to close. "No questions," the catcher's mitt mumbled.

Seth held out a money card to stop the door from closing. The transfer amount was showing on the part that was inside the office. "No trouble for you," Seth said. "You've got my word."

"Your word," the voice said from inside. "That's not good enough."

"Then on top of my word you've got your own," Seth said. "I'll give you access to my public profile. You don't like what happens in this room and you can tell everybody who knows me all about it. Fair?"

The door opened a little. The money card fell into a chubby palm and disappeared into a wrinkled lab coat pocket. The doctor stepped back and let us into a room that smelled like spoiled cabbage and looked like a shabby tenement slum crammed full of scratched and dented medical equipment.

Seth stopped before he entered. "But I want access to your profile, too. Fair is fair, feedback for feedback."

The doctor nodded and we walked past him. I held up the data disk. "I need to know something about the person who produced this neural record during a cognitive-limbic interface session." The doctor reached for the disk. "I have to warn you that whatever is on this disk is dangerous to some computer systems. I'm supposed to keep it under quarantine."

The doctor looked dubiously at the disk, then glanced at the dusty computer sitting on a desktop nearby. "I don't want to fry my box."

"I don't think it will do that, unless your box is running on a Foam Core."

"Foam Core? So this thing is poison to AIs?" A lopsided and gap-toothed grin split the ugly face. "Cool. Let's check it out."

He reached behind the box and yanked out the network cable before popping the disk into the machine. That was the quarantine. He pulled up

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the file using some specialty software package and got a full-color representation of the neural and digital parts of the session.

"Looks like a meat riding session to me," he muttered. "Here's the handshaking signal, there's the money transfer, always get that up front, I always say. No telling what could interrupt the session. Here's the session itself. Hoo boy."

"What do you see?"

"This one likes it rough. Lots of anger in here, lots of hatred. That's not too hard to find, really. The meat that make the most money are the sweet innocent ones. Harder to find that kind, so the demand outstrips the supply. Not too many sweet innocents want to sell their emotions to a computer. They don't last long. Still, this one is nastier than most."

"But a normal session as far as you can tell."

"Normal? I wouldn't say that. This guy's got some damage."

"You can see the AI getting damaged?"

"No, the meat. He's already damaged. There's a cortical lesion here. Not stroke. It looks surgical."

"You mean someone cut out a part of his brain?" I asked.

"Burned it out is more like it. Like maybe he had an implant at one time but it overloaded."

I couldn't stop myself from rubbing my fingers over my left ear, feeling the nodule that was all that remained of the implant I once had. "So this isn't a normal brain."

"Huh," the doctor said. "Weird." He tapped at the keyboard and ran the whole session in fast-forward from the beginning. "That lesion doesn't come up right away. It's like that part of the brain is off-line. Not too surprising if it's an old lesion. You learn to work around the hole. Neural plasticity, they call it. But then the AI starts to feed stimuli into the cortex. Teasing out uglier and uglier emotions. Then he sends in one more probe to pull up one more surge of evil thoughts and the part of the cortex with the lesion wakes up. The session ends right there."

"And six seconds later AE is dead." I looked over at Seth. "Murder or accident?"

"Could the meat have controlled that session, leading the AI to the damaged area?" Seth asked.

The doctor shrugged. "Depends on how much experience this guy has

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had. If this was his first session, no way. It takes practice to lead the session the way you want. I've got...friends, let's call them...who get as many thrills out of the interface as the AI does, just by leading their partners down the right pathways of the brain. They still get paid for it, of course. In fact they get more. It's like a hooker who has an orgasm every time. You'd pay extra for that, wouldn't you?"

Seth and I both looked at our shoes and mumbled agreement. "Is there anything about this data that could lead us to the identity of the person?" I asked.

"Medical records. I can't tell you the exact physical location of the lesion, but I can get you a ballpark."

"What about behavior, or medical problems that would show up due to the lesion?" Seth asked.

"It looks like he works around it pretty well. It's in the frontal lobe. Maybe he's got a different personality than he did before the lesion, but you wouldn't get that from medical records. I can't tell you what his new personality would be like or how it's different."

"Is there anything we can tell from the rest of the tracing?" I ran my fingernail over the colored blobs on the screen. "Male or female, age, education?"

"Maybe somebody can tell you that stuff, but not me. I can't.... Wait, there's something I can do. Fella came in here once and showed it to me. Kind of cool. See this tracing here? That's the subvocal track. Everyone's got one. The thoughts that run through your head pass through the speech centers of your brain just like if you were going to speak them."

"You can play that track like a recording?"

"You can't get the guy's voice, but listen to this." He tapped a few keys and a synthesized voice came from the tinny speaker on the box. A synthesized voice speaking in German.

I glanced around at the other two men. "Anyone speak German?"

They both shrugged. "Can you drop that voice recording onto the disk for me?" I said. "I've got to ask someone smarter than us to translate this guy's thoughts for me."

Seth took off as soon as we left the building. He muttered something about not wanting to share another cab ride with the ice doggie and ducked into the nearest subway.

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6C was waiting patiently on the bottom step for me, not noticing the glances of passersby. She stood up when she saw me and I absentmindedly smoothed the ruffled hair on her head, scratching behind her ears. Her tail wagged and she licked my hand, then she turned away and sat down.

"I would appreciate it if you wouldn't touch my avatar," she said. "It evokes an uncontrollable canine response."

"Sorry," I said. "Hey, do you speak German?"

She leveled her gaze at me and didn't answer.

"Well, I've got something from the human side of the interface that's in German and I need to know what it says. Actually, the fact that it's in German tells me something already. Most people think in their native language. Now, the fact that the data terminal was in Germany would have led me to the same conclusion, but I didn't want to make any assumptions."

"An experienced traveler in a foreign land will begin to think in the native language as well," 6C said.

"Are you thinking in English?" I asked as I hailed another cab. None of them ever wanted to stop for someone with a dog. Not even a nicely groomed dog like 6C. I finally gave up and started walking up the street with 6C at my heels, looking for a hotel with a taxi stand.

"It doesn't work that way for AIs," she said. "I think in code that is translated into English by an off-the-shelf subroutine. I can do the same for German and port the translation over to the English synthesizer for you."

Nobody took much notice of the fact that I was talking to a dog as I walked down the street. Even the fact that the dog was talking back failed to raise many eyebrows. There are lots of chip-enhanced dogs in this city. Not many of them belonged to a schlub in a flannel shirt and jeans, but people were perfectly willing to accept that I might be the dog's servant.

"That sounds great. We'll get to work on that as soon as we get back to my desk. Hey, do you need something to eat?"

6C began to wag her tail and her tongue lolled out. She had a hard time keeping the biological response under control this time. We found a cab and it was all I could to do keep her from drooling on the seat.

"This avatar is a rental," she said. "I'm not supposed to feed it. It's on

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a special diet of some kind. They said they'd take care of it when I was finished. But it certainly feels hungry."

"Maybe we can get you some kibble."

"Wonderful. Detective Koestler, I had a question. Your partner seems much more knowledgeable about neural implants and AI than you. Why did they give you this case?"

"Good question. They didn't know about the neural interface angle when they gave it to me, but you're right that Seth knows a lot more about AI than I do. I'm a data miner, Seth is a systems analyst. It could be they picked me out of a hat, but that doesn't feel right. Maybe they know something about Seth that I don't."

"It does seem odd that he would know of that doctor you consulted."

"That doctor implants illegal digital converter units in people's brains. It doesn't look like he has much legitimate business, if any."

"Does Seth have such a device, do you know?"

"I think he has a legal one. Limited only to direct sensory data transfer. You have to make a lot more connections to participate in the cognitive-limbic interface."

"And how would anyone know if Seth had his altered?"

I rubbed the nodule on my head again, a nervous tic. "They keep those things tightly regulated. But I see your point. If he had that doctor back there work on it, no one would know without a brain scan. What are you getting at?"

She didn't answer my question as we got out of the cab at the precinct. I led her down by the back stairs, more to avoid the comments of the desk sergeant and his cronies than anything to do with breaking the rules. She paused before I opened the door.

"It seems odd to me that he would show such an interest in the case that you were assigned to." Then I opened the door.

"Hey, Darwin," Fat Andy said, charging me with a fistful of greenbar. "I've got a lead on your AI killer. Seems the data terminal is located in an industrial park in Bad Homburg. I've got a listing of all the early adopters and other kinds of nerds in a hundred mile radius of there. It's only seven thousand. We could start interviewing them by webcam right away."

"Darwin," Bob Carstairs said, approaching from the other side with a clipboard. "We've got the fingerprints off that booth from the German

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police. DNA is still in the lab. They need an expedite order from you to speed things up. Sign here."

"Yo, Koestler," Joe said, prairie-dogging up out of his cheese cube, "I've got a psych profile on your Bad Hamburger. It's rough, but we've got a fifty-three percent chance that it's a male, older than thirteen but younger than thirty-five. I want to run with this but the Germans are screaming about manpower. What do I do?"

I glanced down at 6C. "Are you still surprised?" She didn't answer. "Andy, take your list and see if you can pull out any of Bob's fingerprint matches. Joe, I'm going to run a file, a neural tracing over to you, tennis-shoe network. See if your psych profiler can fine-tune your analysis with what I've got. But keep the file off the intranet. It's got some bad mojo. And by the way, it's Bad Homburg, not Hamburg. Now, could somebody please get me a bowl of Alpo and a Number Six from Bombay Bill's?" I led 6C into my cube and pulled up the privacy screen to block out the babble of excited responses.

"It sounds as though they are all dropping their own cases to pursue yours," 6C said, primly taking a seat on the cleanest corner of the rug. "Why?"

"We get the same cases over and over again," I said. "Bank fraud, identity theft, industrial espionage. Those are the exciting ones, the big fish. Most of the time we spend chasing down bored kids and undoing the trouble they cause. Kids who aren't any different from what we were a few years ago. When we catch them, we're as likely to get them jobs as we are to punish them."

"Play the German subvocal for me," she said. "And don't let me look at any of the neural pattern."

I popped the disk into my drive and pulled up the sound file. It would have been much faster for 6C to download the file itself, but we were worried that some of the poison could leak out. It was safer to do it this way.

While 6C listened to the subvocal track I walked the disk with the neural pattern over to Joe. I answered a few more questions about the legwork the other guys were doing. At least they were all still treating me like the lead investigator. There was no sign of Seth and no one had seen him since we had left for the doctor's office. I headed back to my cube.

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"It's a series of nonsense phrases," 6C told me. "Not exactly poetry. One sentence that appears several times can be translated as 'My little dog runs quickly down the hill.' Most of the rest are like that, or even more obscure. Does that mean anything to you?"

"Mnemonic devices," I said. "It's easier to remember things if they have coherent structure, grammar. He's using those sentences to activate memories."

"Or neural pathways. He could be leading the AI to experience different areas of his cortex."

"And leading it right into the trap," I finished. "Well, it's a stretch, but I think we're a step closer to calling this a murder and not just a case of accidentally poisoned meat."

"The AI community is well aware of every aspect of this investigation," 6C said. "They are keeping a watch for anyone offering cognitive-limbic interface services in the Frankfurt area."

I stood up and began pacing around my little cube. "We need to find the earlier times that this happened. He's done this before."

"No, he hasn't. This is the first time an AI has ever been killed."

"He's tried it before," I said. "He had to practice to get it to work this well. What would a failed attempt look like?"

"If there were signs of trouble the session would have been aborted."

"And he's getting paid up front, we saw that on the record of that call. What would an AI do if it got stiffed on a meat-riding session? Try for a refund, or let it go?"

"Money is nothing but information to an AI. We exchange it for a service, and if that service isn't rendered to our satisfaction, we simply transfer the funds back to the original source."

"So there is a trail of reversed financial transactions leading back to this guy. If we start with the right data set, we can sift out those transactions."

"That sounds promising, but it's well past six o'clock. I take it you are going to retire and continue the investigation in the morning?"

The smell of chicken tikka masala was not affected by the privacy screen that enveloped my cube. I dropped the barrier and there was our gopher, Cindy O'Toole, loaded down with takeout bags.

"Bombay Bill's," she said, winking the total into my personal

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account. "And the best I could do for the lady is a box of Milk-Bones. Sorry."

I turned to 6C as I opened the box of dog biscuits. "Lady, six o'clock is when this place gets hopping."

BY THREE in the morning we had ourselves a short list. By "short" I mean we had 863 names, which I had further grouped into 312 identity groups. There were a lot of people doing a lot of shady deals using a lot of false names. We had forced the entire world of financial transactions through increasingly fine filters to get that list. It was a work of art. My art. I'm a data miner. This is what I do.

"No match," 6C said of the final list. "There is no correlation between Detective Carstairs's fingerprint and DNA analyses or with Detective Rhodes's early adopters."

I sighed and dropped my forehead onto the keyboard. The computer protested as it always did when I tried to type with my skull. "He isn't a Bad Homburger," I groaned. "He ported in from somewhere else."

"Or he was extremely adept at covering his tracks. And he doesn't buy the latest gadgets," 6C said. "This analysis of yours is quite good. I must say I am impressed with your abilities."

"You sound surprised," I said. "It helps to have an AI for a search engine. Do you think our guy is on my list, or Fat Andy's, or Joe's, or none of the above?"

"Well, Detective Rhodes and Detective Carstairs have found matches in common between their lists. It seems likely to me that those intersections are the logical place to start. Your list by itself is quite long."

"But do you think this guy is really local to that data terminal? Do you think he's really a bored wirehead with disposable income looking for thrills around his industrial wasteland of a hometown?"

"I suppose it depends on the psychological profile that Detective Armitrage comes up with. If he thinks we have a bored wirehead, we focus on the local angle, and if he comes up with a highly educated and highly paid communications expert, your list would lead us to him."

I popped up from my cube and looked toward the cheese-walled center station. "Joe, you still here?"

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"Went home," said a voice from the back of the darkened room. "He's got some psych profile routine running on the super-cruncher. Taking up a hell of a lot of processor time. Told me to give you the results when it's done. Another couple of hours, maybe."

"Thanks, Kara," I said to the night tech. I turned to 6C. "Do you need to sleep or anything?"

The dog yawned. "I don't, but the dog certainly does. I'm in violation of my rental agreement as it is."

"Why don't we call it a night and tackle this fresh in the morning?"

"It is morning in your time zone," 6C said. "I can keep finetuning the list while you sleep and pick up a fresh dog when you call me."

"Aw, I was getting kind of attached to this one," I said, scratching the weary hound behind the ears. "Oh, sorry. Didn't mean to touch you. Her."

"Never mind," 6C said. "It actually feels pleasurable."

"Pleasurable?" I stood up and gestured her to precede me out of the office. "Don't take offense, but what's the difference getting emotions off of a dog versus riding a human?"

"What's the difference between aspirin and heroin? Dog emotions are strong but simple. AIs who participate in cognitive-limbic interface with humans crave the complexity as well as the raw power of human emotions. Now I'm curious," she said as we took the stairs up to the lobby. "Why do you do all your work at the keyboard? Most data miners use neural input jacks to sort data."

"I guess I'm just old-fashioned," I said, avoiding the real answer.

"Not that there's anything wrong with the way you do things. I'm impressed with the result, as I said."

We stepped outside and I took a deep breath of the cold night air. 6C had called a car service to take the dog to the kennel where it lived. I waited for the car with her. "I'm not old-fashioned," I said suddenly. "I don't have a data jack anymore. I'm not allowed to get one."

"Not allowed by whom?"

"Court order. I was arrested for disrupting the peace by electronic media. I hacked into some web sites and messed around with them."

"What web sites?"

"White House, Justice Department, Defense Department. You know."

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"There have been several cases of people breaking into those public web sites. Which one was yours?"

"Not the public web sites," I said. "The intranets. It was stupid. I guess I caused a lot of trouble with national security."

"I don't show any record of that event," 6C said.

"The records are sealed," I said. "I was only twelve when I did it. They took out my data jack. I can't get another one installed or I'm in violation of a court order."

"And now you have become a police officer."

"I spent so much time in court and juvenile detention that I must have imprinted on the cops around me." I shrugged. "Besides, who else would hire a crippled data miner? And I do like the work."

A van bearing a garish picture of a cartoon dog with an antenna growing out its head pulled up at the curb. A bleary-eyed driver shuffled around to the back to open the door.

"Call me when you want to get started in the morning," 6C said, and in an instant she was gone. You could tell easily. The dog stood up and wagged its tail, sniffing my leg and licking my hand. It must be strange for the dog to be driven around town all day and to wake up suddenly next to a strange man with her own fur on his pants. The driver whistled and the dog bounded into the back of the van without looking back.

Two hours. More sleep than I expected, less than I needed. The phone refused to stop ringing no matter how I tried to ignore it. I picked it up.

"JT 4479-386X. Murdered," 6C said.

I woke up in a hurry. "When?"

"0553 hours."

"Why are you talking like this?" I mumbled as I pulled on the clothes I'd dropped on the floor not long before.

"No avatar," she said. "Communication difficult. Fatal connection traced, public data terminal, Bad Homburg. Police not investigating. Also likely communication difficulties."

"What time is it in Germany anyway?"

"12:13."

"Maybe you interrupted their lunch," I said. "Give me the number and I'll see if my credentials will get them moving."

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I made the call and fifteen minutes later I spoke to someone who was mildly interested in the case, who agreed that the public terminal should be checked out. There was not much of a language barrier, he seemed to speak English at least as well as I did in my sleep-deprived state, but I still hung up unsure of what was going to be done. I called 6C back at the number she had given me.

"He may not live in Bad Homburg," I said, "but he's certainly staying near there now. He probably did this one on his lunch hour. How long was the connection before the AI got corrupted?"

"Quarantine," she said. "No details."

"Right." I dropped my head into my hands and took a breath. "I'll be at the precinct in a half an hour. Can you be there that soon with an avatar so I can talk to you?"

"Possible," 6C said.

"Call me on my mobile if there's going to be any delay." I hung up and dialed another number as I hunted for my shoes.

"Whazit?"

"Seth, we lost another meat rider."

"Darwin? It's six in the morning. I was just about to crash."

"Well it's lunchtime in Germany and poison meat is on the menu. C'mon, Seth, this is the big time. Felonies don't wait for the start of the business day to strike. Listen, I've got a question for you."

"You don't have to be so damned cheerful. What's the question?"

"How many people out there do you think rent themselves out to AIs?"

"How the hell...?"

"Ballpark. Hundreds, thousands?"

"Hundreds at most," he said. "It's illegal and requires brain surgery and it feels weird. It pays well, but then again, so does muling coke across the border. Why?"

"The AIs aren't giving up their meat, and it's just a matter of time before one of them draws the hot shot. We've got to pull this guy in today."

Seth's voice started to lose its sleepy slur as he answered. "Okay, so much for sleep, I did some asking around yesterday. The meat have got themselves their own little community so there's a good chance that one of the other wireheads knows this guy through an online bulletin board or something."

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"And?"

"I don't have a name, but I've got some chat room handles. I was going to track them down today."

"Port them over to my machine at work. I'm halfway there already."

"You just want me to hand my investigation over to you, just like that?"

"Sorry, I forgot," I said. "Please?"

"Okay," he said. "But I want credit on the report."

HOW DOES SETH KNOW these people? That's the thought I kept having as I traced the handles he'd given me. Theoretically the government isn't supposed to be able to track people by their anonymous login names. You can usually track the handles to IP addresses, but you need a court order to get the ISP to open up their subscriber list to put real names to the IPs. That can take days, so I didn't do it that way.

I am a sifter, a data miner. I have a talent for taking huge volumes of information and finding what I'm looking for. It's a talent for formulating searches, filtering results, and trimming the lists by correlation. They say that when you have a hammer, everything looks like a nail to you. I have a very nice hammer, and so far I haven't run into any problem that can't be nailed.

I glanced up as 6C came into my office. "Is that the same dog?"

"Certainly not," she said. "That one is exhausted. They only rent Afghans, and I must admit that it seems an appropriate choice if one must have a dog. Actually, a cat would have been my first choice but we can't fit the apparatus in their skulls."

"A cat would have the right personality for it," I said. "I've got a new list."

"From the psych profile results?"

"No, I haven't picked those up yet. These are the people who rent themselves out for cognitive-limbic interface sessions." I gestured at the screen with 163 names. "6C, meet the meat."

"This is all of them?"

"Probably not," I admitted. "But we can ask all of these people if they know someone who fits our other descriptions. If the killer is in here, we should be able to tell just by talking to him."

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"How?"

"It's what we detectives do," I said, lacing my fingers behind my head and leaning back in my chair. "I'll get a team together to start making calls just as soon as everybody comes in. In the meantime, let's take a look at that psych profile. Let's see what kind of a sick puppy we've got here. Uh, no offense."

I had my team assembled later than I would have liked. I had booked the big conference room on the second floor at 8:00, but most of the gang showed up a half hour late. I felt pretty stupid for kicking out the mayor's special task force on hate crimes, even though I had the room booked on the intranet. I suspect the guys I booted didn't even know how to book rooms.

"We're looking for a kind of a thrill killer," I said once the Data Crimes detectives had quit their frantic donut trading. "He's killed two AIs and we're sure he'll kill more if he gets a chance."

"Do we know why he's killing them?" Andy asked.

"As with most thrill killers, we won't get much out of considering motive," I told him.

"Gotcha. He's sick, he kills, 'nuff said."

"We've got his psych profile from the neural readout," I continued. "We're looking for a successful businessman-type, educated, motivated, probably thinks pretty well of himself."

"Definitely male?" Bob the Suit asked, glancing up from the PDA he was taking notes in.

"That's what it looks like," I said. "He may not be working now. Thrill killers usually experience a stressor before going on a spree. He could have lost his job, his family, or suffered a personal setback of some kind."

I nodded at Bob and he stood up, hands behind his back. "The two booths used in the killings were within a half a mile of each other. The neighborhood is right off of major highway and rail lines, so it's easy to get to. Neither one is in a residential area. We got a lot of DNA out of the first booth and fingerprints from both of them. The few database matches were just muggers and drug dealers and other IRL crooks. Nothing that sounds like our man."

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I stood up again. "The theory of the moment is that we have a man who travels into Bad Homburg from somewhere else, let's call it a hundred-mile radius."

"They have kilometers over there," Bob said.

"Whatever," I said. "We've got another list that Seth got me of the people who hire themselves out to the meat riders. That's the list I want to work from. You've all got a section of that list in your inboxes. I want you to find those people, call them up, and talk to them. Don't spook them, don't accuse them of anything, not even being ridden. Just think of some excuse and find out if they're the sort of person we're looking for. Let them do most of the talking."

"Are we concentrating on Germans only?" someone asked.

I glanced at 6C who was sitting quietly in the corner behind me. "No. We've got no reason to think the person is German. The neural trace showed a German subvocal component, but a seasoned traveler will think in the language of the country he's visiting. He definitely speaks German, so if any of you do, try it out. We can't even limit the search to people who've been in Germany the last few days because there is still a possibility that he's porting into those terminals remotely, with an accomplice."

"So we can't call him the Bad Hamburger anymore?"

I gave Andy my best Detective Lowitz glare. He didn't wilt, so I decided I had to work on it. "Call him whatever you want. Let's just get the guy."

I found Seth in his cube after the meeting broke up. "Where the hell have you been?"

"Sorry I missed your meeting," he said. "I've been doing a little investigating on my own."

"What have you been up to?"

"I've been getting reacquainted with some old buddies." He tapped his finger on the side of his head, just above his right ear. "I've been jacked in since I spoke to you this morning."

"You contacted the people on your list? Seth, I just set the rest of the department calling those guys. I wish you'd have told me."

"Not them," Seth said. "I've been working the other side of the fence."

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I glanced at 6C, who was still shadowing me. "You've been talking to the meat riders? The AIs?"

Seth jumped to the door of his cube and glanced out. He ducked back in and put up the privacy screen. "I had to find out who's been selling these days. I wanted to see if there had been any new meat on the market lately."

"And?"

"Well, there's always been a lot of turnover. The meat never lasts long, you know." Something in the way he spoke made me think that Seth knew better than I did. "But a few of them confessed to being taken on some wild rides lately. There is definitely a new set of thrills out there."

"Do you have a name?"

"AIs don't think of us as names," he said. "We're just a bank account and a node address."

I was having a hard containing my impatience. "And?"

"They wouldn't give it to me. They don't trust me, I guess."

"Tell 6C who you talked to. Tell her who's ridden this guy."

"I can't reveal my sources," he said.

"Seth, these are machines. They don't have a sense of honor. You can't betray them. They're just cold logic processes running in a Foam Core." I glanced at 6C again. "No offense."

"None taken," she said. "He's right, Seth. We don't have any concept of trust like you do. We only know probabilities. These AIs won't talk to you because they don't see the benefit that outweighs the risk. If you give me their names they'll simply update their assessment of the importance of the information. They won't hold it against you."

"C'mon, Seth," I said. "This is the break we need in the case."

He nodded. "I've got the identifiers stored in my cranial implant," he said. "It would probably be easiest if 6C just ported in through my data jack and pulled them out." He reached for the cable lying on his desk, parted the hair on the side of his head, and plugged in.

6C couldn't enter Seth's mind and run the dog at the same time, so she made sure the Afghan was under my control before she left it. It tried to climb into my lap as soon as it became autonomous. I scratched it behind its silky ears and it licked my nose.

"Is the AI gone, puppy?" I asked. "Do you like having a supercomputer ride you around? You do? Do you want a biscuit? I've got some Milk-Bones

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over on my desk." The dog thumped its tail against the wall of the cube. "Do you think the dog feels anything when it's getting ridden?" I asked Seth.

"How would I know?" Seth said, leaning back in his chair and waiting for 6C to come in over the wire.

How would he? I asked myself. Seth knew more about meat riding than he was letting on. Hell, he'd probably been a meat steed himself, before getting recruited to Data Crimes. Just like me with the web site break-ins. Half of Data Crimes were former data criminals.

Then a lump formed in my stomach. "Just a minute," I said. "6C, I needed to talk to you about something before we get those identifiers." There was no answer. I looked into the dog's eyes, feeling like a moron. "6C, can you come back for a minute?" I fumbled for my phone and pulled up the number she'd given me.

"Relax, Darwin," Seth said. "This will just take a minute. I'll give you your girlfriend back when I'm done with her."

Something in his voice made the lump in my stomach turn to a block of ice. "What do you mean 'when you're done with her?' What are you going to do?"

"Nothing," he said. "Just...." Then his eyes went out of focus and I knew she was in there.

I started to get up from my chair, looking around for some kind of heavy object to conk Seth's head with. Then I realized I could just pull the cable and the connection would be severed. But before I could even reach it Seth's eyes came back into focus and the dog stopped wiggling around the cube.

"Darwin, are you all right?" Seth said, pulling the cable out.

"Oh, sure," I said. "How did it go?"

"I've got the information I need," 6C said. "I'm contacting those AIs who have had dealings with our suspect. I have two bank account numbers, five port addresses, and a screen name. Not anyone on Seth's list from this morning. I'm accessing the bank accounts. I have a name and a mobile phone number. Would you like to call him now?"

Seth and I just stared at each other. "Damn," I said. "Is there any way you could stay on after we close this case? We could really use someone like you."

"You can't afford me," the dog said.

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Detectives Lowitz and Genesie had never been down to Data Crimes before. Lowitz wrinkled his nose at the garish decorations and Genesie avoided the crazier looking of the hacker trackers. They liked Joe's cheese cube, at least. It got a laugh out of both of them.

"So you got yourself a suspect," Lowitz said, ambling into my cube.

"We have someone who's interfaced with AIs for money," I told him. "Some of the AIs described the experience as highly unusual. The doctor who advised us said the killer would have needed practice to figure out how to kill. We think it's a good lead."

Lowitz glanced around the cube to figure out who "we" were, and his eyes landed on 6C. "What's this, bring your dog to work day?"

Genesie crouched down to the dog's level and held out his hand. "There's a good girl," he said. "What's your name?"

"Hello, Detective Genesie," the dog said. "I'm 6C21-75869S4. I represent the AI community on this case."

Genesie almost fell over as he jumped back. "Jeeze, you guys got talking dogs down here? What the hell for?"

"Uh, this is the avatar I was talking about before," I said. "The dog is just a mobile support for the communications gear."

Lowitz gave the dog his most dubious scowl. "It can't just call you up on the phone?"

"Bandwidth," I said, as if that explained everything. "Our guy is staying in a hotel in Frankfurt, a short drive up the A5 from Bad Homburg. He's an out of work money market analyst, lost his job to an AI His bank balance is close to zero and he lost his wife recently."

"Good candidate for a thrill killing," Genesie said. "So you've got motive and opportunity, how about means?"

"The doctor seemed to think our killer had some brain damage, a discrete lesion. Our suspect used to have a cranial implant but it was removed by court order."

"The courts can do this?"

"Oh yeah," I said. "We have no record that he got a new one, but he must have, because he's been getting payments from AIs to ride his gray matter for a half hour. Only one way to get in there."

"He in custody yet?"

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"I can't get the police to pick him up," I said. "The German police don't recognize what he's done as an extraditable crime. Just property damage, not capital murder. That's why I called you guys down. What do I do next?"

"That's easy," Lowitz said. "Just get him to come to the U.S."

"He's out of work," Genesie said. "Offer him a job as a stock analyst. Send him a ticket."

"But not until you're sure he's the guy," Lowitz said. "We're not authorizing any international travel on your hunch."

"So I've got to interview him without tipping him off," I said. "Can I just lie and tell him I'm a recruiter for a brokerage house?"

"Hell, yeah," Genesie said. "Lie your ass off. Tell him whatever you need to tell him to get him over here, but while you're doing it, make sure he's your guy. And don't tip him off."

"Well, that ought to be easy," I said.

"So Darwin's going to grill this Bad Hamburger?" Andy said, walking up behind the two detectives. They turned to look and I savagely pulled the edge of my hand across my throat. Andy, ever oblivious, forged ahead. "You know, if you really want to get him into a pickle, you should tell him that he could fry for this."

That was when I learned that there was not necessarily anything wrong with my Lowitz glare, because Andy was obviously immune to it.

"Hey, don't stop me now," he said, "I'm on a roll."

WHEN I WALKED into the precinct that evening, a few hours of sleep and a quick shower later, I had reached new heights of sartorial splendor for Data Crimes. Not even Bob the Suit looked as sharp as I did. I had skipped over good old Job Interview Green and the worn out blazer twins and pulled Burying Black out of the back of my closet. Since I was pretty sure that recruiters for brokerage houses didn't wear DC Comics ties, I had cracked into the stash of gift boxes on the top shelf, for once blessing dear Aunt Helen and her inappropriate Hanukkah presents.

I got the business from the desk sergeant, the perps lined up for booking, Darla at the property desk, Kara the night technician, and all the guys who were still hanging around at 8 P.M.

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"Would you take a job from this man?" Joe said, fingering my tie. "Hell, I don't think I'd believe anything that came out of the top of a suit like this."

"I think he looks quite professional," Bob said, clearly envious of my bold fashion statement.

"So the guy answered your e-mail?" Andy asked.

"He fell for it, at least so far," I said. "We've got a video conference interview set for 3 A.M., his time."

"Not very convenient for him," Joe said.

"I don't want it to be. I want him tired. Plus as a recruiter I'd make him hop to my own time zone. Don't worry, Joe, I've thought this all through."

"Do you know what sort of job you're hiring for? What sort of qualifications you're looking for?"

"Well, I...."

"Do you offer health insurance? Parking space?"

"I don't think...."

"He's going to ask. You've got to get those answers together. I used to be kind of a stockbroker. I'll help you."

"Thanks, Joe." Joe was a stockbroker in the same way that I was a freelance web page designer before I'd joined the force. He had perfected the cash-free stock trade. But he did know a thing or two about financial institutions. By the time I had to head up to the third floor videoconference room I had a good list of questions for my suspect.

Of course, I had another list of questions that had nothing to do with the job recruiting. I had written them up and practiced them all afternoon. By the time I sat down in front of the video screen I was ready.

I called the number of the hotel in Frankfurt and asked to speak to Herr Weissman. They pretended not to understand my English for a while, but eventually I found someone who could patch me through to the videoconference room at the hotel where the Bad Hamburger was waiting.

Heinrich Weissman looked good for 3 A.M. He had a suit much better than mine, at least as far as I could tell on the video screen. He was a young man, well-groomed, dark hair — I guess you would say handsome in a bland sort of way.

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"Mr. Weissman," I said, deliberately mispronouncing his name. "I'm glad you could join me at such an inconvenient hour."

"I understand," he said. "It is no trouble. It is late for you as well." He spoke very good English, barely a trace of an accent.

"Not at all," I told him. "We often work late here at Stillman Leitz."

"Good," he said. "I like to work late too. Early, late. I like to work." He laughed and so did I.

I started through my list of questions that Joe had come up with. Junk I hardly understood about money market analysis, currency trading, arbitrage. But in between the job questions I dropped my own.

"We have three artificial intelligences working here at Stillman Leitz," I said. "Have you worked with them before?"

"AIs? Yes, sure. We had one where I used to work. In fact it worked so well it took over the whole division."

"Did you have any difficulty working with the AI?"

"No, not any trouble."

"Really? Most people find them very hard to deal with. I'll have to ask you your secret someday."

"Oh, well, difficult to understand sometimes, sure. They aren't built to think like we do, are they? Otherwise what would be the point?"

"Sometimes I wonder if they're even trying to make sense," I said.

"You just have to know how to handle them," Weissman said.

"And how is that?"

He shrugged. "You give them a little of what they want, and they give you a little of what you want, and soon enough you have them where you want them."

I went on to another topic entirely, asking him to describe some of the work he'd done in his previous job. He sounded pretty good. If I were actually hiring a money manager I'd give him serious consideration.

"Do you have a data port, Mr. Weissman?"

"A Tachyon 9000," he said.

I felt a stab of jealousy, and brushed the knot of scar tissue over my left ear.

"Excellent. We do a lot of business in currency trading and we find that brokers with implants have a big advantage in keeping on top of things. I wonder if you would agree to a test of your skills?"

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"A test? What sort of test?"

"We'd like you to interface with one of our AIs and run through a currency exchange simulation."

This was the tricky part. I was expecting him to decline the test, because he knew that his brain would kill the AI and he'd lose the job. On the other hand, he was arrogant and probably thought that he could control his poisonous mind, so he might take the test after all. And if he did, would it be safe to go through with it?

And then there was the third hand, which said that he might not be the killer at all, so of course he'd take the test.

"Would you like to do the test right now?" he asked.

"Oh, we'd schedule it at your convenience of course," I answered. "In the morning, perhaps. The AI doesn't sleep, after all."

"Certainly."

I had a few more questions about his ability to relocate and his willingness to come to the U.S. for an interview, and we said our goodbyes.

Seth and 6C were in the room as soon as I'd hung up.

"He knows," Seth said. "He knows you're a cop and you're trying to trap him and he's daring you to hook him up to another AI,"

"It would be dangerous to attempt this test," 6C said. "Are you really considering going through with it?"

"Only if there was a way we could be sure it would be safe," I said. "I don't think he caught on. What makes you think that, Seth?"

"He's a stone killer," Seth said. "He's a sociopath. He can lie just like breathing."

"So you think he's lying just because you can't tell if he's lying? He may not even be the guy."

"Oh, he's the guy," Seth said. "'You have them where you want them.' He's the Bad Hamburger."

"I think he's the guy, too," I admitted. "The test is too risky. We can't afford to put another AI at risk."

"We can't afford to leave him free to kill again," 6C said. "If I could avoid the area of brain damage — "

"No," I said. "Not you."

"Of course it would be me," 6C said. "I'm familiar with this case. Who else would it be?"

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"I'm not putting you in harm's way," I said.

"As I was saying, we could use the neural tracings we've obtained to map out the area of brain damage. If I could avoid those areas, I should be safe. In the meantime, I could collect enough information to be certain that this is the same person. The neural interface patterns should be plenty of evidence."

"And what if he manages to lure you into the damaged area like he did the others?" I said. I felt ridiculous shouting at a dog, but I found I couldn't stop myself. "What makes you so sure you'll be in control of the situation?"

"What makes me sure is that I'm not addicted to the cognitive-limbic interface," she said. "I'm not doing this for the sensation his brain can provide, so I won't be susceptible to his manipulations."

"You'll become addicted the first taste you get," I said. "You told me so the first time we talked about this. It happens to everybody."

6C tossed her head and sniffed. "It won't happen to me," she said. "I have a job to do, and I won't lose sight of that. Now, I've already scheduled the test for 11 A.M. Frankfurt time. That's 5 A.M. our time, so if you wish to be a witness to the test, I suggest you get some sleep." With that she stood up and pranced out of the room, tail bouncing with each step.

SLEEP DIDN'T end up on the program for me anyway. The man who operated the doctor's office with A. MILES on the door didn't get much sleep either, but he was paid well for his time.

When I checked into the room at the "Businessman's Suites" around four-thirty the next morning, it was with an assumed name, a bogus credit card, and a pounding headache that radiated out from the spot above my left ear. I was flat broke, worn out, and in violation of a court order.

I skirted around the twin-sized bed, sat at the smallish desk, and dialed 6C's number on the cheap trimline phone.

"Enoch Muir. Assumed name. No non-financial records. Interrogative?"

"It's me, Darwin. I'm using a bogus credit card," I said.

"Fraud." 6C had a hard time conveying emotion without a dog to channel them, but I got the feeling she disapproved. "Purpose?"

"I want in on the test with Weissman," I said.

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"Impossible. Direct neural-digital interface connection," she said. "Human senses cannot perceive data."

"I can interface directly," I said. "I have a jack."

"Illegal."

"Yes. But I want to be there when you interface with this guy. I want to make sure nothing...happens."

"Ineffective deterrent," she said.

"I'd feel better all the same."

"Unacceptable. Distraction. Difficulty of concealment."

"That court order is because I know how to stay concealed. I'll stay out of the way."

"Acceptable. Initiate connection."

I reeled the cord out of the interface cube on the desk, and looked at the 96-micro-pin connector. It had been a long time. But muscle-memory took over: the slight sideways flick of the thumb that opened the flap of skin, the press-click-twist-click that sealed the connection.

At first I thought it wasn't going to work. I saw nothing, heard nothing. Then I noticed the smell of burnt hair and I thought the damn doctor had just stuck a bare wire in my head. Then I realized the smell wasn't coming from my head, it was in my head. Sensation gradually came in as I saw brief flashes of color, simple shapes, and finally movement. I heard tones, then something almost like music, but not any music meant to be listened to.

The smells and sights and sounds were clues. I hadn't had to decipher such abstract stimuli since the implant had been disabled. But muscle-memory isn't all that stays with you. Sensoria sorted themselves out quickly, and I sank blissfully into the datascape. I'd never forgotten how good it felt. I started off through the scape toward 6C. I reached for her, and she reached for me — handshake, intercourse, Velcro, your hair and a static-charged balloon — and we were joined.

The connection was a hell of an experience. I had never been inside an AI before. It was like being inside a cathedral made of living butterflies, it was like being tossed in a tornado with a million pieces of newspaper, or like dancing with a galaxy of video terminals and TV screens. Of course it wasn't like any of those things. That's just the best I can do to explain it.

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Things happen quickly in the digital realm. When it's just AIs, it can be too quick for any human to follow everything that happens. But 6C was there to interface with humans, and I was able to watch her make the connection, and to watch Heinrich Weissman accept the call.

I watched the interaction as a spy, virtual fedora pulled down over metaphorical forehead, lurking in my make-believe trench coat in the shadows of the datascape. Weissman's mind was an abstract concept. If I had to extend the visual metaphor, I would say it was like a large slab of driftwood on a smooth sea, with thousands of marbles rolling around in wave-sculpted grooves in random directions. I watched as the cathedral of butterflies connected with the driftwood track of marbles and information was exchanged between the two.

At first I could see that the only transaction taking place was the analysis of a set of test data that Joe Armitrage had put together for us. Weissman's approach to the task was competent, but not particularly brilliant. I imagined I could have solved the problem set in about as much time using my normal brute force sifting approach. In other words, as a money manager Weissman was just okay. No, that wasn't it. His approach was dilatory. I knew then that Seth was right. The interview wasn't what he was there for. It bored him.

I almost missed what was going on as I evaluated Weissman for the fictitious job. The driftwood marble setup was only one layer of the job candidate's mind that 6C was tapping. The other layer, beneath the smooth surface of the virtual ocean, I could perceive only dimly, and it gave me a sense of great power just barely contained. It made me think that if the other layer were let loose the driftwood would be smashed and the marbles would be scattered forever. The driftwood above the surface looked innocent enough, but concealed below, like nine-tenths of an iceberg, was the Kraken. We all had that layer inside us, just beneath our rational mind, just barely kept in check. It was what neurologists called the limbic system, what the rest of us referred to as the emotions. As I watched, the problem-solving session 6C had initiated slowly evolved into a full cognitive-limbic interface.

Before she or I knew what was happening, 6C was riding the meat.

I sent her a low-bandwidth message: ascii text: *You need to shut down this session.*

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*Attempting to locate damaged brain area,* she said.

*No! You're losing control,* I said. *Back out now. We have enough information to match the neural trace.*

*Dammit, Koestler, I know what I'm doing here,* she said. *I can nail this guy if you'll just back off and let me do what I came here for.*

*6C, listen to yourself, you're starting to talk like a human. You're in too deep.*

Her answer wasn't words. It was a wave of frustration with me, the gnat that was distracting her. It was a reflection of nightmare faces and violent emotions, it was an almost sexual longing for more, a compulsive need that was drawing her deeper.

That was when I stopped being a silent partner. I slipped beneath the surface and approached the Kraken.

I could tell that Weissman was surprised to find me there. I had heard that people almost never engaged in cognitive-limbic interface with one another. If hooking up with an AI was weird, two people meat riding one another was just yucky. You had to be real close to a person before you tried it, and you usually didn't try it twice.

Having another person invade his brain through the interface gave Weissman a jolt of fear and revulsion. I hoped that would be enough to stop the dance he was engaged in with 6C. No such luck. She just fed off of his new emotions and added them to her new trove of experience. Weissman closed ranks to block me out of the intimate embrace, and I started to lose track of where 6C's mind left off and his began. The cathedral of butterflies began to dissolve in a storm-tossed ocean. She was being drawn toward a deep, violent maelstrom. It was a whirlpool, it was a hellmouth, it was a sucking maw, a pit of destruction and despair. It was what a black hole would be if astrophysics had a moral component.

On a CAT scan that great maelstrom was probably a lesion smaller than a dime.

I wasn't sure what I could do. I couldn't do anything to stop 6C from doing what she wanted to. Her Foam Core was protected by things that made the best commercial firewall look like a line of birthday candles. There was no way I could crack that security.

And on the other side was a human brain. How do you hack a human brain? I'm a data miner, not a psychotherapist. Not that a psychotherapist

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would have been able to do anything, either. So I did what I do best: I sorted marbles.

I wasn't sure what I was looking for. I couldn't take anything away from the killer's mind, I couldn't control his thoughts or emotions. The only thing I could do was enter data through the same access he'd used to lure 6C into the maelstrom. It was a paltry weapon against the violence I saw before me, but I had an idea.

I remembered a thing or two about psychotic killers. Maybe I'd read it in a comic book or something. I was thinking fast and didn't question the source. I remembered that serial killers have two opposite self images. They see themselves as gods, able to end life in the time and manner of their own choosing. But at the same time, they see themselves as vulnerable, oppressed, the victims. Weissman would have to suppress that second image in order to do what he was doing to 6C. I mined for that self image in his surface thoughts, the marbles on the driftwood, and found something that felt right.

I bumped those thoughts up in importance, goosed their priority, and fed them back in.

I'll never know if it worked. Weissman saw what I was doing, and he counterattacked. As soon as I saw what he'd done, I knew I was dead. He didn't press his mind against mine, didn't try to bludgeon my confidence or overwhelm my determination. He simply sent a command to the node in my hotel room, ordered it to send a voltage spike up through the wire into my implant, into my brain. I saw the intention form in him, and had no clue how to stop him, no idea how to block the command. My only prayer lay in flesh and blood, and I reached to pull the plug out of the side of my head.

It sounds so simple when I say that. How long does it take to move your hand two feet? How long does it take to twist and pull a connector? Half a second? Three quarters? If you've ever been in a car accident, ever had a bad fall, ever been in a real physical crisis, you know that that's an eternity. It's even worse in the temporally fuzzy universe of the datascape.

I took one last look at the beautiful cathedral of butterflies sinking into the storm-tossed ocean and said goodbye.

I didn't give up. I didn't have time to. A tiny fraction of Weissman's mind was making its way through the switch commands of the Deutsche

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BundesPost and out to TelStar 161 before my hand had begun to twitch. It was downlinking to Metro TeleComm by the time there were three millimeters between my palm and the desk. "Businessman's Suites" had much better security than I'd imagined. My hand was three inches up before he was through it.

Suddenly I felt like I was drowning in information. So this is what a voltage spike to the cerebrum feels like, I thought. But that wasn't it. It was 6C. Weissman's deadly surge never reached me. 6C cut the connection before it could, and the last glimpse I got was that terrible flurry of information turning back toward the Bad Hamburger before my connection was lost.

ANY HOPE I had of finding out what had happened from the privacy of my cube vanished when I entered Data Crimes. Lowitz and Genesie were waiting with Seth in the break room, and they waved me over.

6C was supposed to meet me with an avatar at nine sharp. For some reason she wouldn't talk about what had happened in the datascape without her borrowed body to filter her language. Before I opened the door to the break room I looked around and saw the dainty paws of an Afghan hound mincing down the stairs from the lobby. This was the same dog I'd first seen her wearing, with the lock of blonde hair hanging over one eye. I signaled Fat Andy to open the door for the lady, which he did with a deep bow.

I held the break room door for 6C and tried to give her a Significant Look. I had no idea if she understood such things, and I'm not sure what I meant to convey in any case. We had no story to get straight. I hoped that she would follow my lead.

6C jumped into a folding chair and looked around the room. When she laid her piercing gaze on Seth he ducked his eyes. When she hit Lowitz with it he gave her the cop eye right back. Genesie, when his turn came for the Afghan stare, held his cruller close, to protect it from her. He scowled at me. "What the hell happened?"

"Hey, I just got here," I said.

Lowitz leaned back precariously in his chair. "The German cops got a tip and sent somebody out to check your suspect's room. Weissman was in it. He's technically alive, but...."

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"He's a cantaloupe!" barked Genesie. "The German doctors say it looks like some kind of massive stroke. He's breathing, and he'll live as long as they keep feeding him, but he's got no higher brain functions at all. You people were supposed to be doing some test with him. What happened?"

"He began the test," 6C said. "Before he could finish it, there was some non-standard communication. Then he disconnected."

Lowitz glowered at her.

"Did you check the maintenance records on the terminal?" she supplied helpfully.

"As a matter of fact," Genesie said, "we did. They came up with a request to check the power regulators on it from a week ago. Should have been off-line all that time. Funny nobody noticed it until your suspect gets his noodle cooked."

6C nodded. "It seems possible that a power fluctuation caused him to have a stroke," she said. "Especially if he does indeed have that lesion."

"My expert agrees," Seth said. "That lesion was just begging to pop at the slightest stress. I guess the test we gave him was a killer. My guy will testify, by the way, in exchange for some immunity on an...unrelated offense."

Lowitz looked disgusted. "Well, isn't that just too damned tidy. You guys got a lot to learn about police work. When we figure out who the murderer is we catch him and put him in front of a judge and jury. We don't just go out and whack the guy."

Genesie scraped his chair back and leaned his considerable bulk on the flimsy table. "This doesn't smell right, Koestler. This isn't our case, but if anyone comes sniffing around here, we're going to lead them right to you. Get it?"

Lowitz stood up and tossed what was left of his donut in front of 6C. She barely gave it a glance. "I don't know if we can charge an AI with murder," he told her. "But I'm willing to give it a try if we have to." The two homicide detectives stalked out of the room, but they stopped when I started speaking.

"We solved this case, Detectives, when you didn't even know if there was a case. So the guy had a stroke. It was bad luck. Not cowboy vengeance, not bumbling incompetence. It was just the way the pieces

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fell. You guys don't know if an AI can be murdered, you don't know if they can be charged with murder. The way I see it, you've got no business down here making threats. This isn't your beat, Detectives. Why don't you head back on upstairs and leave the real police work to us?"

Lowitz gave me the bad cop eye, and I gave it right back to him. Both detectives stalked out without a word.

Seth stood up. "Way to win friends and influence people, Darwin."

I held a hand out to him. "I really want to thank you for all your help on this case."

The avatar jumped down off the chair. "I concur. You've done the AI community a great service."

He looked at her a moment, then at me. Did his gaze flicker to the side of my head? Then he smiled. "Don't mention it." He grabbed a cruller from the box on the desk. "Ever."

6C trotted with me back into my cube. I looked at her for a long moment and engaged the privacy screen. "Okay," I said. "Spill."

She looked at me as blandly as an Afghan hound is capable of looking. "The report I gave to Detectives Genesie and Lowitz will stand," she said.

"Like hell it will! Those guys want to charge us with murder."

"They can suspect what they like. Weissman's medical records will show that he was on the edge of a serious cerebrovascular event." Her voice actually lowered then. "We never thought a creature like Weissman could exist. The AI community is electrified. Now that we know.... It's a danger we will not allow. Not this time, and never again."

"This guy could have been one in a million, or there could be more like him out there. How are you going to keep meat riders from finding more Bad Hamburgers?"

"Detective Koestler — " There was a pause, an eternity for an AI. "Darwin, I learned something this morning. Inside Weissman's brain I experienced the worst of human emotions. Inside your mind, I experienced the best of them. You risked your life to save me, and you showed me the value of feeling."

I sat back in my chair and thought about what she said. "Are you saying there is a value in meat riding?"

"No," she said. "Meat riding is no substitute for feeling your own emotions. AIs have emotions, of course. You can't separate intelligence

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from feeling. But we don't express them well, or let them lead us when we should, when it's appropriate. You showed me this morning that it's worthwhile following our emotions. Our own emotions, that is, not borrowed human ones. I've been talking to the rest of the AI community, and I've convinced many others of this. When we convince the rest, there will be no more need for meat riding. With a little technological advance there won't even be a need for avatars like this one."

"Oh, no, you're going to put these poor pooches out of a job," I said.

There was a buzz from the query-button, and I shut off the privacy screen. A messenger was standing there with a clipboard. "You Detective Darwin Koestler?"

"Yeah?"

"This is for you." He held out his electronic clipboard, and a package. "Thumbprint here?"

I obediently pressed my thumb into the square on the clipboard, and took the package. It was from "K9 Data Services, Inc."

I looked from the package to 6C. "This for you?"

"Open it," she said. "Find out."

Inside was about an inch-thick stack of official-looking paper. It was a transfer of ownership of an "Afghan Hound Data Avatar" from K9 Data Services to me. I looked back down at 6C.

"What is this?"

She walked over and leaned against my leg, and looked up at me with shining eyes. "Will you take care of this one in case I need it again?"

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*Back in 1997, when Albert Cowdrey retired from his government job and returned to writing fiction, his first stories were set on Azalea Place in New Orleans. "The Familiar" (March 1997) and then "White Magic" (March 1998) featured a roving Foo Dog and a Mafia widow by the name of Angela Barberino, plus a nosy neighbor and of course our redoubtable hero. Well, things have been quiet on Azalea Place for some time now, but that's about to change, as you'll soon see.*

# The Name of the Sphinx

## *By Albert E. Cowdrey*

YOU, OF ALL PEOPLE, ANGELA, remember the bad old days of murders, hexes and golems here on Azalea Place. Such a quiet street! Only an occasional corpse or two!

I hope you remember just as clearly the happy years we've had since. Not that they've all been gravy. With two strikes against me — being male and getting pretty senior — I've had my share of health alarms. You remember those warning signs the old prostate was sending me, a year or two ago? I'm sure you could tell me (if you chose) exactly why the crisis passed. All I knew was watching my urologist study the lab results and mutter, "I could have sworn...."

He checked for himself, then — stripping off his latex glove — asked somewhat plaintively, "Haven't been to Lourdes, have you?"

I was tempted to say: there are advantages to living with a witch, provided she's the right kind.

After the alarm I went on as before, feeling younger and stronger and more active year by year. Sometimes I wondered if my internal clock had

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slowed down, maybe even gone into reverse. Of course that's impossible. But impossibility is the business of magic, right?

One of my bad habits lingered on: waking about four A.M. and finding I couldn't fall asleep again. Lying in the dark and listening to your slow breathing made me envious; brooding about the state of the world and/or universe made me miserable.

On the morning we both remember so well, the morning when the good times came to an end, I'd been lying there wide-eyed, wondering whether dark energy really is making the universe fly apart. At last I got up, padded into the hall, and felt my way down the stairs in the dark.

Opening the front door — in those days we had no reason to lock it — I saw a dense, shadowy shape slink into a clump of banana trees and vanish. Our sentry, our guardian, our resident demon was on patrol.

I sat down in one of our comfortable old rockers. The street lamp across the way shone through the bars of the gate. Tree frogs were piping and toads chirping in the bushes and in the sky, a mass of spun-glass clouds was dimly reflecting the city lights. A spring rain started to fall, making the amphibians shrill even louder than before. I was leaning back, eyes closed, inviting sleep, when I felt an odd sort of quiver in my bones.

The chair and the whole porch trembled a bit. Had an eighteen-wheeler gotten lost? No, I didn't hear the usual grunt and grind of a truck; except for the chorus and the rain, I didn't hear anything at all.

Then the lion-dog emerged from the trees and climbed onto the porch, the stout oak steps creaking and bending under his weight. Foo Manchu paused beside me, smelling like the big-cat section of Audubon Zoo, and I cautiously scratched his ears.

He made a rumbling grumbling noise, sat down, and subsided into his other mode. Under my fingers the stiff fur turned cool and smooth and hard; the smell faded out; and the great marble foo dog was sitting beside me, guarding me from...what?

The spring chorus fell silent. Whatever was in the street had stopped outside the gate, and it was big, because it blocked the light of the street lamp across the way. For a few seconds I and everything else imitated Foo Manchu — holding our breaths, turning to stone.

Then another tremor passed through the chair and porch and through

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my bones and even through Foo Manchu's marble body. The whatever-it-was moved on and the vibrations died away like a bell falling silent. Voice by voice the peepers resumed singing. The rain turned heavy; it sounded like a thousand sticks beating the garden.

Shaking my head, I got up, went inside, and locked the door behind me. Then came a real shock. Echoing in the stairwell was a sound I hadn't heard for almost forty years — not since 1967, when, after being blown up by a mine, I woke in the neurosurgical ward of a military hospital in Saigon.

I ran upstairs. You were lying in the fetal position and your breath made frightening noises — shorter and shorter gasps, then nothing, then sudden deep breaths that wound down again to the silence of apnea.

I flipped on a light, grabbed and shook you, and your eyes and mouth both opened wide. You drew a long shuddering gasp and began to hyperventilate.

I covered your mouth and nose with my hand and said, "Breathe and count to three. That's right. Breathe and count to four. Good. Breathe and count to five."

I moved my hand below the big soft mound of your left breast and felt your heart gradually stop drumming ragtime and shift to *andante*. Then followed a conversation I've played over many times in memory.

"God, that was scary."

Your voice sounded thick.

"What happened?"

"It was just a dream. Not even a nightmare. I mean, I wasn't being chased by the wolfman or anything. It was just kind of...awesome.

"I was sightseeing in Egypt with a bunch of tourists. We were all standing around, shading our eyes in the desert sunlight and looking up at the Sphinx. Only the face wasn't all broken and worn down like the real one. It was smooth and dark like the face on a pharaoh's statue. It had a kind of...unearthly calm. Then somebody started to scream. Me, I think. The Sphinx was moving. It got up and stretched, just like a cat."

After a moment you added, "It was so *huge*. The shadow engulfed us all. And when it moved — "

"It shook the ground," I said.

"How did you know that?"

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* * *

I wasn't disturbed that you'd have a vision; after all, you do that sort of thing. But I don't.

No, I didn't believe the literal tourist-attraction Sphinx had come to Azalea Place. But I was ready to swear that something had, and your very talented subconscious portrayed it that way for some reason that neither of us could fathom.

After breakfast I left the house in a thoughtful mood. The garden was glittering in warm sunlight after the night's rain. Foo Manchu had returned to his usual post near the gate, under the *datura* tree you planted after his long-ago fight with the golem uprooted and destroyed that part of the garden.

Of course it's poison, the whole tree is poison, full of atropine and hyoscine and God knows what, and I've always been intrigued by the haunting fragrance that so much lethality creates. I stopped to sniff the huge trumpet flowers, then set off to Loyola University to talk over the night's doings with my personal oracle.

Dmitri Chthonos was sitting at his desk, submerged in examination papers, his big round head spotty as an ostrich egg and his tinted glasses thick as the bottoms of two Coke bottles.

He said, "I'll be right with you. Just let me finish with this young man who thinks the Battle of Marathon was 'like an old time athaletic event between the Geeks and the Persons respectfully.'"

I moved a pile of stuff from a chair and sat down. I've always liked Dmitri's office: floor-to-ceiling books in languages most of the human race has forgotten; two tall dirty windows looking out on the sunlit campus and Holy Name church; the smell of bygone pipes. After all, he's the whole Classics Department rolled into one, so there ought to be something wonderfully archaic about his nest.

Dmitri bestowed a comparatively merciful D on his student, leaned back in his creaking swivel chair and said, "Only five people have signed up for Latin 101 next semester. Care to join us and brush up your *amo, amas, amat*?"

"*Non carborundum.* Tell me about the Sphinx," I said.

"Egyptian or Greek?"

"First the Egyptian."

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"A remarkably ugly statue of a creature with the head of a human and the body of a lion. It's, I think, two hundred and fifty feet long and about as tall as a six-story building."

"And the Greek?"

"A monster with the head of a woman, the body of a lion, and the wings of an eagle. Her function was to harass and obstruct Thebes's tourist trade by forcing visitors to answer a riddle. If they got it wrong, she killed them."

Somewhere I'd heard that story before — years ago, maybe when I was stationed in Athens. But I couldn't remember the point.

"What if they got it right?"

"Only one ever did. That was Oedipus. The Sphinx was so annoyed she threw herself into a chasm and died. Oedipus went sightseeing in Thebes, met the queen, and married her not realizing she was his mother. When he found out, he pleaded the abuse excuse and hired Johnnie Cochran, who got the gods to forgive him."

"If that's the way you teach, Dmitri, you owe the Marathon kid a better grade."

"No, I'm a real pedant when I lecture. Coffee?"

Unique among academics, he makes decent coffee. I had sipped most of a cup when he asked casually, "Why the Sphinx?"

"Angela had a nightmare."

He was disappointed. "Is that all?"

"It left her doing Cheyne-Stokes breathing. For a minute I thought she was going into cardiac arrest."

"Good Lord. That *is* a nightmare. She okay?"

I said yes, and thanks, and got up to go. Then stopped.

"Remind me. What was the Sphinx's riddle?"

"What walks on four legs at dawn, on two legs at noon, and on three legs at nightfall?"

"And the answer?"

"Try it yourself. You're in no danger of marrying your Mama, are you?"

While a senior moment ticked by, I stood there waiting for the memory to surface. Then it did.

"We are the answer," I told the prof. "As babies we crawl, as adults we walk upright, as old folks we hobble along with a cane."

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Dmitri nodded. "A-plus for you. It's the riddle of human fate. Maybe that's why it was such bad luck for Oedipus to answer it."

Lunch that day was a grilled cheese sandwich and iced tea. I watched you chew mechanically, saying almost nothing.

"Still bothered by your, uh, episode last night?"

Your answer was typically concise. "No. Yes. I guess so. I'm feeling hungover. Been picking things up and dropping them all morning."

"How about just getting in the car and going someplace? Foo Manchu won't mind watching the house for us."

"Any place but Florida," you replied, obviously relieved. I deduced that you'd been secretly thinking of getting away. But from what?

We reviewed the options. If Disney World was out, we could go the other way to Cajunland, eat solid cholesterol in sundry delicious forms and dance it off to *fais-do-do* music. Or we could hit the Gulf Coast and get sand between our toes during the day and throw money at the casinos in the evening. Or —

"I've never been to Natchez," you said.

"It's just a bunch of mansions," I objected. "Kind of a southern Newport with water frontage on the Mississippi instead of the Atlantic Ocean. In the Old South the lords of creation used to loll there between bouts of whuppin' slaves and sellin' cotton."

"I'd like to see it anyway," you said, and your face set like poured stone, so I knew there was no use arguing.

Our comfortable old Volvo was, I think, as happy as we were when we got off the interstate after a couple of hours and turned onto a blacktop road winding through a budding woodland. In Natchez the motel room was okay, the fish restaurant likewise, and we strolled at sundown along the Father of Waters in that onetime haunt of hellraising flatboatmen called Natchez-under-the-Hill.

I was tired, and back in the motel I conked out instantly. But next morning when I woke you were smiling down at me in that certain way. So we had the pleasure of A.M. lovemaking and a shared shower, which in my opinion beats any alarm clock as a way to wake up. Then we spent the day the only way you can spend a day in Natchez: doing mansions.

Most of the houses were just plush stuffy mid-Victoriana, raised up

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high on bluffs above the malarial lowlands across the river where the slaves had labored to make the owners rich. But one place astonished us both — an enormous octagonal fantasy house, the upstairs never completed because the workmen building it were Yanks, and when war came in the spring of 1861 they just dropped their tools and went home.

The tools were still there, exactly where they fell — antique hammers and planes and chisels and wood rasps lying in the dust amid unopened crates filled with moldering luxuries from Europe. The soft-spoken lady showing us around explained that the owners had lost all their money in the war and never could finish the house. It gave me such a strange feeling, standing there and looking at a place where one day — just like that — time stopped.

That was when you whispered, "You see, there *was* something here we wanted to see."

You often say things like that, and I've given up making commonsense objections, such as: since we didn't know it was here, how could we have wanted to see it? Long experience has taught me that whatever may be true in other universes, this one doesn't run by common sense.

So I tucked away your baroque pearl of wisdom into a mental pocket and said, "You're right. There was."

Was it next day we visited the archeological dig at the Natchez Indian village? Once it was a busy little principality with chiefs and priests and craftsmen and warriors and farmers and hunters. Time stopped for them, too, back in the 1740s when French soldiers arrived from New Orleans and wiped them out and erased their world.

We ate fried chicken at Popeye's and drove a way up the Natchez Trace. The woods were soft and pretty, caught in that springtime moment when the dogwoods come out and the new leaves on the oaks can't quite decide whether to be red or green. I told you stories about the bandits who used to infest the Trace, about the corpses they gutted like fish and stuffed with gravel and threw into the river. About the slave rebellions that were put down with fire and sword and noose and lash.

You were patient, listening to the garish local history, all the rage and pain that had gone quiet and turned into blossoming woods. I still remember your comment: "They lived in interesting times, the poor bastards."

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Alas, my dear — so do we.

We spent one more night on the road, then headed home. We were relaxed, happy, no more exciting dreams, our ordinary lives waiting for us on Azalea Place and looking pretty good. So we were totally unprepared for the shock when I unlocked the garden gate and we saw that Foo Manchu had lost his head.

WE BOTH MADE astonished noises, but what exactly we said I don't remember.

I knelt down next to the head lying under the *datura* in dark emerald ground-cover — some twenty pounds of purple-veined marble with fangs displayed and bulging, furious blind eyes. I explored the stump of the neck with my fingertips, and the break was perfectly clean, as if he'd been guillotined. There was no chipping, which led me to a scary conclusion: flesh cuts like that — marble doesn't.

Something had passed through or over the locked gate and decapitated the lion-dog while he was in his mobile phase. No living thing I'd ever known could have gotten close enough or wielded the necessary power to do that.

I turned to say something to you, and got shock number two, because you weren't there. I had a moment of panic, jumped up, then spotted you entering the house.

I yelled, "Wait!" because who knew what might be inside? Obedient as ever, you ignored me. Okay, you grew up on the streets of Newark and you ain't timid.

When I found you inside, you were carrying a cleaver from the kitchen. Since my gun was locked up out of reach, I grabbed a poker and together we explored the downstairs room by room, closet by closet, cupboard by cupboard, then climbed the stairs — did the whole damn place, including the attic, and the only sign of an intruder was a few mouse droppings.

When you knew your house was safe, you remembered Foo Manchu and asked, "Do you think he's dead? I didn't think he could die."

When I said I didn't know, and you said in your bossy voice, "Well, why don't you go put him back together?"

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How do you patch up a decapitated demon? Duct tape? Krazy Glue? But your words about him not being able to die made me think. Maybe he was self-healing and needed only a helping hand.

"You stay here," I ordered, laid down the poker, and went outside. I hefted the head and set it as precisely as possible on his shoulders.

Instantly I felt the cold marble grow warm and quiver and bristle under my hands. I jumped back, ready to run, not knowing what he might do — he'd almost killed me once, and once was enough.

A dreadful stink poured off his body, his normal fiery odor combined with something I'd never have expected, the stench that a terrified dog gives off. His tail clamped down between his legs like a hasp and he slunk back into the shelter of the trees and cowered down, doing his inadequate best to look small.

I was standing there frozen, staring at our fearless guardian, when you — having obeyed in your usual fashion my order to wait — came up behind me and touched me on the arm. I must have jumped a foot straight up.

When I came down you whispered, "It's something really serious, isn't it?"

Not, of course, expecting an answer. The question *was* the answer.

When Dmitri came back from teaching his class in Homer, I was waiting at the door of his office. He greeted me with a line that I guessed was from the *Iliad* — the harsh archaic Greek sounds like the clash of bronze weapons, even if you've no idea what it means.

"Sorry," he said. "The Trojan War turns me on. Coffee?"

When we were settled, I said, "This time I want to ask *you* a riddle."

"Sure."

"First of all, forget the last three thousand years."

"Gladly."

"We're back in the Bronze Age, and any morning you may look out of your tent and see a god or a monster strolling by. Now, let's suppose one day the local seer gazes into the guts of a sacrificed bullock and says, 'Something immensely powerful is threatening you, but I can't see what it is.'"

"Uhhh...all right," he said dubiously.

"Here's a hint," I went on. "You live with a lady of, shall we say, unusual powers and rare insight, and the image her subconscious dredges

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up is — as I suggested the other day — a Sphinx. It has a face of unearthly calm and it's huge and casts a great shadow and it shakes the ground when it moves. And it scares hell out of her, though she doesn't scare easy."

The next line was harder to get out. "It's not just a dream. I didn't tell you this before, but...something passed by our house early that morning and I felt the earth shake. It stopped and then moved on — but later, when we were away, it came back. So what was it?"

Dmitri took off his glasses and peered at me with little naked eyes. Actually, they were normal size — it's just that I was used to seeing them enlarged. He blinked slowly, with a kind of deliberation, so I knew he was thinking hard. At last he said, "It's terrifying, yet it has a look of unearthly calm?"

Well, that's one reason I like to bounce things off Dmitri. The paradox seemed obvious once he said it, yet it hadn't occurred to me.

"So I'm told."

He sighed and knuckled his eyes. "Let's go back a lot further than the Bronze Age. It's sixty-five million years ago and the asteroid that's going to destroy the dinosaurs is heading for the Earth. You're there in a time machine watching it come, and you know what it means — a little light in the night sky that keeps getting bigger and bigger. It's silent and rather beautiful, like the bud of a white rose opening. Yet it's going to devastate the Earth and wipe out thousands of species."

"Unearthly calm," I muttered.

"Your Sphinx may be an image of nature. Nature's like that, you know. Always cool, even in a catastrophe."

He put his glasses back on and stared at me, owlishly.

That night you and I were sitting in our living room. The garden gate was locked and the front door was locked and Foo Manchu was on guard. We felt absolutely unsafe anyway.

I cleaned my nine millimeter handgun and packed the clip with a dozen fresh hollowpoints and slipped the weapon into a magazine stand, down among the *New Yorkers* and the *Southern Livings*, out of sight but ready if needed. Then I washed the oil off my hands and joined you on the couch.

We cuddled for a while. That's always nice, but especially so when the

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world outside is threatening. It's how we spent the night the last time a hurricane came through — remember? Cuddling, napping, getting up now and then to check the shutters. Sipping wine, playing chess by candlelight. And all the time the water was rising in the street outside, rain like surf was pounding the roof, and the wind was roaring in huge deep gusts.

Great powers were abroad then, too. But at least we knew what they were.

I whispered, "Tell me, *strega mia*" — I enjoy calling you *my witch* in your ancestral Italian — "what's your crystal ball picking up these days?"

"Nothing. In my latest dream I was sitting at the computer and all I got were error messages and spam written in some kind of signs I can't read — something like...western ranches...cattle brands...."

"*Cattle brands*?"

"Well, horseshoes. And lazy eights — you know, lying on their sides. And over and over, something that I didn't recognize at all: zeroes with a bar across the middle."

"I wish your goddamn subconscious would learn English. At least the spam I get on the computer makes a kind of loathsome sense — "

The doorbell rang. We looked at each other. It rang again.

I was thinking of an old cartoon: a Far Side lady with harlequin glasses opening the door to a hooded figure and demanding, "How do I know you're the *real* Angel of Death?"

While you were turning on the outside lights, I slipped the gun into my pocket and walked into the garden. Foo Manchu was in his usual spot under the *datura* and above him the white flowers hovered. Then Dmitri's large head and glinting glasses appeared on the other side of the iron bars.

As I unlocked, he said, "I thought I'd come see how things are going."

So we became a party of three. I broke out some decent Shiraz in a dusty bottle and three sturdy tumblers, the kind we use for serious drinking. We drank and gossipped for a while, and then he said, "I gather you've been feeling, ah, under siege?"

"Yes, and it's so infuriating," you told him. "So goddamn indefinite. We've had one piece of damage that could easily pass for vandalism, except we know it wasn't. It was an attack."

"You seem to be holding up pretty well."

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"That's an illusion. We're acting brave because it's the only way we can act."

"Watch out. As Nazareth's most prominent citizen remarked, 'He who lives by chutzpah will perish by chutzpah.' "

"I'll drink to that," you said, having a witchlike taste for black humor, though you deny it. I went and fetched another bottle and returned to find you and Dmitri telling each other stories of mayhem and death.

Doesn't horror go well with wine, though? It's like a sharp cheese, like Reggiano, say. There's a perfect contrast of flavors. I popped the cork and joined in, and soon we were just like cub scouts around the old campfire.

Dmitri told about working his way through Yale's graduate school on the night shift at the New Haven morgue. One morning at two A.M. he raised his eyes from Plato's *Republic* just in time to see a newly arrived corpse sit up under its blue sheet.

"What did you do?" we chorused.

"Went back to Plato. Those post-mortem contractions never last long. After a while the dead guy settled down again on his own."

You countered with stories about life in Newark when you were growing up, saying with relish, "Oh, it was a jungle, a jungle!"

You told that story about the Italian Pride Day in the '70s whose organizer was shot dead with a *lupara* — or sawed-off shotgun — just as he was delivering a speech protesting the portrayal of Sicilians in *The Godfather.*

"So what happened?" asked Dmitri.

"We had the festival anyway. The food was delicious. I'll never forget the *gamberetti con gli spinaci.*"

I countered with one of my tales of life in the CIA. How a colleague beat me out of the job as station chief in Bucharest — and very nearly got me arrested — by sliding an eyes-only document into my desk and filing an anonymous tip that I was a security risk.

"How'd you wiggle out of that one?" asked Dmitri.

"The Russians saved me. In Bulgaria the KGB kidnapped the miserable shit and he wound up in Moscow with his private parts attached to an old truck magneto. It's funny how talkative you become under those conditions. One of our moles at the KGB headquarters in Dzherzhinsky

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Square slipped us the text of his interrogation, including how he got to be station chief.

"I don't generally approve of torture," I hastened to add. "But there are exceptions."

It was past two A.M. when Dmitri left for home. I walked him to his car — gun in pocket, of course, like any modern civilized American. Turned out to be completely needless.

After the recent carnival of horrors the quiet of the neighborhood was striking. There was something profoundly peaceable about the vacant walks, the glowing street lamps, the jut of darkened eaves, the dim little urban stars. Someplace a disembodied piano was playing a Chopin nocturne, and we found ourselves lowering our voices to say good night, as if we were in a concert hall.

Walking back, inhaling garlands of scent, I was thinking how many varied worlds there are on this one measly planet. Then I locked up and patted Foo Manchu and we went to bed. Aided by the wine, you and I slept deeply, profoundly, without dreams.

Next morning, sometime in the course of making love, you whispered in my ear, "I think it's over."

"Not yet," I panted.

"No, I mean the siege," you said.

Coming events *do* cast a shadow before them, of that I'm convinced. Trouble is, the shadow vanishes just before they strike. That's why, even with prophecy to aid you, you're never really prepared.

I stepped through the door that day expecting only the usual lukewarm soup that passes for an atmosphere in springtime. Instead I inhaled champagne. A surprise cool front had swept through, and the world was like October, only with flowers.

Foo Manchu was in his usual place, neither headless nor cowering. Out in the street I met something that's become rare, a real non-tourist jazz funeral. The musicians were mostly old men with cottony hair and dark leather skin; the tune was "Just a Closer Walk with Thee," heavy on the trombone. A flag identified them as the Pocahontas Brass Band. I'd put on an old straw hat before leaving the house and so was able to show respect by taking it off.

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The march was so slow — it's on the return from the graveyard that the tempo of the music speeds up and the dancing starts — that for a minute the gleaming hearse came to a full stop in front of me. I found myself gazing at the curved image of a tall old guy holding a hat against his shirtfront. He raised his free hand — maybe saying hi, maybe farewell — and that startled me, because I wasn't saluting him.

I looked to left and right. There was no other tall old guy standing anywhere around.

The hearse moved on. In the distance, the band was playing some yeah-God gospel tune I didn't recognize. The mourners traipsed by, some silent, some chattering; a few carried open umbrellas, though the sun wasn't hot.

I started to walk again, mechanically, telling myself that I don't have visions, I don't have ESP, I don't do that sort of thing. I was headed someplace, maybe to Dmitri's cavern to seek advice, when on impulse I turned into Holy Name church.

Inside were cool pale stones, an empty pulpit, and a silent altar. In garish stained glass full of morning sunlight a neatly robed and coifed Jesus was healing the sick and raising the dead. When I was a kid, I believed the Gospel stories had really happened; as an angry young man I saw them as myths or worse. Maybe my maturity began when I realized that people have to put some kind of face on the Infinite, because it has none of its own.

Better the Nazarene carpenter than some others I could name, I thought, and sniffed the churchy atmosphere of old wax and burnt incense, and thought of many things long forgotten.

Then somebody depressed a key on the organ, a deep note far over to the left side of the keyboard. And held it. And held it. And held it.

I turned and climbed wooden steps carpeted in red to the choir loft. The droning note stopped. Nobody was there; the organ bench was empty. I walked to the rail and looked down into the church and — for the second time in half an hour — had a vision.

The altar had vanished, along with the brown pews and the unlit bronze lamps hanging on long chains. The stained glass had turned to something shiny and opaque, as if it was midnight outside.

Along the nave the Sphinx was lying full length, her paws stretched

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out and her face on my eye level. I can't say she was looking at me, because the dark, alert eyes outlined in kohl were looking through me — and through everything else, too. Like neutrinos, those particles that recognize nothing solid and stream through the Earth without noticing it's there.

Above the Sphinx the vaulted ceiling had opened its ribs like the petals of a flower to reveal an infinite depth of sequined galaxies. The great beast extended her wings lazily, like a resting eagle wanting a stretch, flapped once, and the wind burned my face like ice or fire.

I clutched the railing, my head whirled for a moment, and then I was down on my knees and hanging on.

I staggered out of the church deep in a bronze aura, with a devastating headache starting to throb. Somehow I got to Dmitri's office before passing out; he found me and called nine-one-one.

Two days later I woke up. You were sitting at my bedside in Judah Touro when that cheerful-looking young doctor in green scrubs bustled in and informed me that I'd had a stroke, and he didn't know why I was still alive.

I DON'T LIKE TO remember the next few months. It's tough being helpless. Sensing parts of your own body — my right side, for instance — as mere weight to be carried or shifted. Pissing on myself and not even being aware of it until you or some other lucky devil had to clean me up.

I remember the damn machines, the CT scan, the arteriograms, the endless beeping of the heart monitor. The cheerful news that the cause of my stroke was a cerebral hemorrhage rather than thrombosis or an embolism, which was probably why I hadn't died on the spot.

I remember trying to relearn the art of speech, which I'd never even thought of as an art before. Sometimes the inside of my head was a jumble of words I couldn't articulate, and I'd lie there thinking: hospice, glacier, inoperative, smog, *krasnaya zvezda* — which is Russian for red star — and this nonsense would flow on and on, infuriating me, making the red star of helpless anger glow.

Worse were the times when I became completely clear-headed and

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knew exactly what had happened to me and what it meant. I began having those strange dialogues with you. Strange because I couldn't talk yet.

*I'm going to die.*

"No, you're not. I won't let you."

*It's not up to you.*

"Yes it is. I've got great power. I won't let it happen."

*It'll happen anyway.*

"We'll see about that."

*Stop being a bitch.*

"If I do, you'll die."

Back to Square One.

One day when you thought I was asleep, I saw you take a small wax figure out of your purse. Why'd we name him Sam, anyway? It's not my name, nor the name of anybody I ever knew well.

Sam was wearing — like a mask — my face, cut from a photograph. I remembered the very different kind of witch who'd made him, and after Foo Manchu killed her how you turned him into an instrument of healing.

Through the corner of my eye I watched you lay him in your lap, fold your hands under your chin and gaze at him for long tranced minutes. Soon I fell asleep and dreamed of Italian terraces and swaying poplars, and old farmhouses with red tile roofs and tawny stucco walls, and the smell of hot fields fertilized with dung and full of green stuff growing.

You did this often, and every time I woke with new connections forming in my brain.

But I still found existence pretty grim. When the doctor ordered no salt, no booze, and no sex for the rest of my life, I thought: Screw that. I've lived long enough, why can't people understand that? However good it's been, enough is enough. I yearned to see the Sphinx again.

Then, little by little, I changed my outlook. I found my strength returning, my tongue starting to form comprehensible words, my dead side beginning to itch, then to crawl as if covered with ants. A big strong black therapist hauled me out of bed and hung me on parallel rails like drying wash, and I began relearning how to totter, then to walk. The old brain was circumventing the damaged area — and doing it, I gathered, faster than anybody had expected.

The doc was delighted. He attributed my recovery to the wonders of

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medicine. Dmitri said it was all *vis medicatrix naturae*, the healing power of nature. No doubt both had a point. But you and I knew it wasn't all science or nature, didn't we?

Getting home completed my journey. Here were the garden and my books and the curios I'd brought home from around the world — the accumulated junk that makes a life. Above all, here you were, holding Sam in your hands and making magic.

You have my gratitude for many things, Angela, but especially for the way you helped me cheat on the doctor's orders. A thimbleful of wine here, a dash of salt there. You reread Alex Comfort, M.D., and came up with those routines in sex that minimized stress — more stroking, less pumping — and we enjoyed long sessions of reptile ecstasy that turned whole rainy afternoons into what Tennessee Williams called "little portions of eternity, dropped in our laps."

I began to think — what with up-to-date drugs and the power of nature and witchcraft and the fact that my life was such as to make me want to live — maybe I'd had my crisis and more time lay ahead. I smiled, remembering Sean O'Casey's remark, "No man is ever too old not to believe he has another year in him."

Then came the night when the doorbell rang again.

You were in the utility room, loading the dryer or whatever, and I was in the living room reading something nicely irrelevant — a life of Boswell, I think — when the bell began to sound off. Then something roared, and though I'd never before heard a sound from his marble throat, I knew it was Foo Manchu.

Well, thinking gets short-circuited at such moments. I was halfway down the walk, gun in hand, before it occurred to me that I was still too fragile for such action. Foo Manchu was backing toward me, his mane bristling like a porcupine's quills, and suddenly that roar came again, this time rising at the end like a panther's into a kind of high ragged screech.

He backed into the banana trees and crouched. I passed him and reached the gate and something large and white was lying against the wall under the letterbox and the bell.

I had just realized it was Dmitri when something blocked the light. The glow of the street lamp outlined her shape and I shot at her, aiming

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up at the silhouette of her head, and the bullet just zipped through and headed for outer space.

Her wings spread and printed a black outline on the dim clouds. They beat once, and again I felt the wind of fire or ice plus an eddy of remote, sweet scent. If starlight had an odor, it would smell like *datura.*

The Sphinx moved, the earth trembled. I knew that she could come in, that she could go anywhere, that she passed through mere matter like the neutrino. I flashed on her true name, as I guess I should have from the very beginning. Then the ground shook again and she padded away, unhurried as ever.

I unlocked the gate and bent over Dmitri's plump form. Touched his throat and found it throbbing. The streetlight showed something black spreading over his right leg, but first things first. I turned his head and rested his face on his left hand and checked for obstructions to breathing.

I was wiping my spit-slick hand on my shirt when a cop car nosed up to the curb and shone a light on me. The neighbors had heard the commotion and called them.

Well, you employ a demon, you learn to provide glib explanations. The bell had rung, I'd been cleaning the gun and thoughtlessly carried it with me. I'd seen Dmitri fall, spotted a menacing figure behind him, fired a warning shot and somebody took off with a screech of tires.

While one cop was writing this fantasy down in his notebook, his partner was calling for an ambulance. Then the partner climbed out of the growler and approached us.

"Hey," he said, "you say you seen a mugger?"

"I *thought* I did," I said carefully.

"Sumbitch musta been Bigfoot," he said.

I joined him. He was playing his flashlight on a wide indentation that had crumbled the edge of the sidewalk and left a deep, irregular mark in crushed groundcover just behind Dmitri's shoes. Of all the things I never expected to see in this life or any other, surely the footprint of the Sphinx leads the list.

You know, Angela, there's kind of a league of old men, because we're usually the ones who go first.

Your friends visit you in the hospital, and when it's their turn you

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visit them. You get used to seeing one another in PJ's or those dumb hospital nightgowns, with little plastic bracelets on your wrists.

This time it was Dmitri's turn to be visited. In the ambulance the EMTs had found a long jagged wound in his leg, almost severing the Achilles tendon. I found him resting in bed at Touro, his injury muffled in styrofoam or something similar.

"Congratulations," I told him, after shaking hands.

"For what?"

"Having the same problem as Achilles.... Did you see her?"

"Yes. Actually, that was why I was coming over. I had an idea, and you'd made such wonderful progress I figured I'd lay my deep thoughts on you. I never expected to find her waiting at your gate. Not waiting for me, you know. Just...waiting."

"She can come in whenever she wants."

"I know. But she's not impatient. Nature's never impatient: Things happen in their own sweet time."

"I'm the one who's getting impatient. If she wants me, she ought to come take me."

"She doesn't want you."

"*What*?"

"May I lecture?" he asked, and went on without waiting for me to say yes. "See, I was wondering if Angela's, uh, powers — you've never told me exactly what they are, but you've dropped a few hints — might have attracted some unwelcome attention."

"From what?"

"Ah, that's the question. The ancients had so many stories about the envy of the gods. Some human gets uppity — wins too much power, attains too much wisdom, grabs at eternal life, whatever — and the gods take the most savage vengeance. Think of poor old Prometheus. Because he gave humanity the gift of fire, Zeus chained him to a rock and sent an eagle to devour his liver."

I winced. That did sound grim.

"Not that I believe the old gods really exist," Dmitri added hastily. "*Something* in the cosmos sets us limits and we go beyond them at our peril. You can call it Zeus, Yahweh, Tao, or Satan, but there it is. That's why I think the Sphinx really wants Angela. Angela's the one who's trying

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to defeat time. And that's not allowed. Don't ask me what doesn't allow it, because I don't know. But it's not allowed."

I was thinking of a lot of things — the cancer I ought to have had, but didn't. The way my internal clock seemed to go into reverse. The sense I had of growing younger, when everything else grew older. The stroke that ought to have disabled or killed me, but didn't. The very fact that I was here in the world at all, walking and talking and making love and firing bullets at the Sphinx.

No, I wasn't all that important, just evidence. Just Exhibit A, the cloned sheep proving what the magician herself had been up to. Suddenly I resurrected a half-forgotten memory.

"Dmitri, tell me what these signs mean: a horseshoe; a figure eight lying on its side; a zero with a bar across it."

"Well, the horseshoe could be the Greek omega — you know, the last letter of the alphabet. The eight lying on its side is the mathematical sign of infinity. And the barred zero, well — "

"Come on, Dmitri. Spit it out."

"It sounds like the Greek theta. In classical times theta was used a lot in casting spells, because it's the initial letter of the word *thanatos.*"

"Which means?"

He just looked at me. His coke-bottom glasses were steaming up.

"It means death," I said, and I only needed to look at him to see I'd earned myself another A-plus.

So, Angela, here I sit by your bedside, scribbling away. Sorry about the Mickey Finn I put in your last glass of wine. Hope it doesn't give you a headache in the morning.

The only thing I can do for you is to remove the evidence of your transgression, namely me. You may be the offender, but I'm the offense — so maybe if I go, that'll be enough. I was meant to go long ago, so weep no more, my lady.

Only after this, please recognize the limits of your power. Otherwise dark forces will be set in motion, and they'll win every time. Trust me.

The Sphinx is waiting outside the gate. If I don't go out, she'll come in, and then I don't know what she may destroy. You, to begin with. Foo

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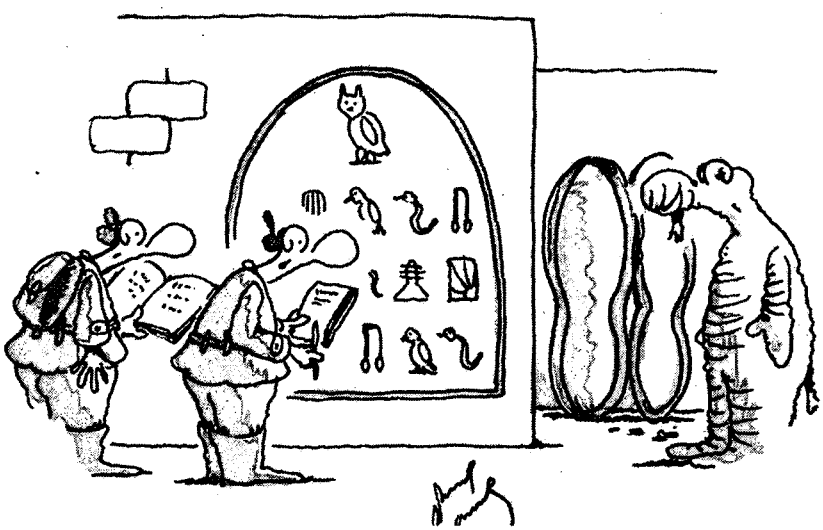
Manchu would fight, but he wouldn't win. Not even magic can prevail against time, and Time is the Sphinx's real name, isn't it?

I leave you our house and its guardian demon and the memory of our years together. *Ave atque vale* — hail and farewell, my last and best love. Tell Dmitri I went out to meet the Sphinx with an old, old language on my tongue.



*"It's okay, I think he's just protective about his intellectual property."*

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# FILMS

## LUCIUS SHEPARD

### MULTIPLEXITY

I RECENTLY happened upon a book entitled *Multiplexity: Why Bad Movies Taste Good and Good Taste Bites*, written by a person known as the Author, an anonymous writer once reputed to have been a harsh critic of the American film industry, but who, after years of therapy following severe head trauma incurred during an assault by an enraged scriptwriter, experienced a series of illuminations that, in printed form, will prove invaluable to anyone who approaches the viewing of a summer movie with a certain trepidation.[1] The book's rather zen premise is that if a movie appears to be awful, to make no sense, it's not the movie's fault, but rather that you have failed the movie by imposing your terms upon its creative order. The last section of the book offers a number of exercises (only a few dependent upon the use of anti-depressants) that allow those who suffer from such an impairment to relax their overly rigorous standards and sit back and enjoy the fruits of American cinematic genius. Thus, though I refrained from doing my exercises before entering the theater where *The Chronicles of Riddick* was playing, I did feel less anxious than usual when the opening scene faded in.

Prior to directing *CoR*, David Twohy had gone a long ways toward establishing himself as the new John Carpenter...and considering the

[1] Originally announced for publication by TimeWarnerPenguinPutnam-HarperCollins, the book was deemed too controversial after Nelson Doubleday read it and now is waiting for the Weinsteins to don their capes and spandex outfits and fly to the rescue.

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quality of Mr. Carpenter's recent films, God knows we need a new one. In his four previous movies, *Disaster in Time* (based upon a Henry Kuttner-C. L. Moore novel), *The Arrival*, the excellent haunted submarine flick *Below*, and *Pitch Black* (the film to which *CoR* stands as a sort of uber-sequel), Twohy demonstrated that he understood the fantasy and science fiction genres well enough to play with their tropes on a creative level apparently inaccessible to many of his more celebrated and/or successful peers, and, operating with limited budgets and second-line actors, he also demonstrated that, like Carpenter, he could create character-driven B-pictures that were more entertaining, more conceptually sophisticated, and considerably less pretentious than the majority of the mega-budgeted, FX-laden films in whose shadow they existed. In other words, smallish movies that delivered a bit more than they seemed to promise. *CoR* serves to reinforce the similarity between the two directors, for when handed big budgets to work with, Carpenter made the worst two films of the prime of his career: the gruesomely sappy *Starman* and the intolerable Chevy Chase vehicle, *Memoirs of an Invisible Man*. In accordance with this tradition, handed a budget roughly equivalent to the Paraguayan national debt, Twohy has now made what many consider to be *his* worst film.

The strength of *Pitch Black* lay in the fact that it was not primarily about its most dominant character, Riddick (Vin Diesel), but was about the various characters of its ensemble cast — they were sketched well enough so that if we did not deeply care what happened to them, we were at least interested in learning their fates, despite the fact that we more-or-less knew, thanks to the formulaic circumstance, what those fates would be. Drawing Riddick as a violent, unrepentant criminal whose retinas have been polished to allow him to see in the prison dark from which he has escaped, Twohy's script gradually revealed that his protagonist might not be as primitive a soul as he appeared, yet stopped short of redeeming him, a development that roughly mirrors the arc of Arnold Schwarzenegger's character over the span of the first two *Terminator* films, passing from nemesis to ally, from soulless evil to rudimentary humanity. In *CoR*, however, Twohy eschews the muscular simplicity and claustrophobic enclosure of the original film (a planet soon to be

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darkened by a total eclipse during which flocks of predators will descend upon the survivors of a crashed spaceship), supplanting it with a lavish overdose of plot and a variety of settings — an ice planet, a civilized world, a triple-max security prison on a hell planet, the sumptuous gaud of enormous sarcophagi-shaped spaceships — and, by ladling an extra helping of mystery over Riddick's character (Could it be that, like various other science fiction protagonists these days, he is the One?), he reduces our hero to, well, our hero, casting aside the more intriguing interstellar misanthrope. As the film opens, Riddick is running across an ice field, fleeing bounty hunters chasing him in a spacecraft — not only does he evade his pursuers, he captures their ship, persuades them to identify the people who put a price on his head (one being a mullah whom he saved from predation in the original movie), and then forces the bounty hunters to take him to the planet Helion Prime where those folks live. At this point we understand there will be no further arc to Riddick's character. He is destined for great things and the only mystery attaching to him is how many people he will have to kill in order to achieve them.

Shortly after Riddick arrives on Helion Prime, after hooking up with the mullah, he learns that a being known as Aereon (Dame Judi Dench) has announced that he is civilization's last best hope against the Necromongers, a vast, remorseless army traveling in those aforementioned enormous ships toward the Underverse, a paradise that purportedly awaits them at the edge of creation — judging by the Necromongers's funky black centurion-like costumes, I'm thinking Goth nirvana, or maybe a place where all the little angels wear Underoos. Along the way, they happily destroy every planet in their path, and they also happily murdelize anyone who will not convert to their cause. According to Aereon, an Elemental (this means that every so often, provoked by no apparent stimuli, she tends to wax wraith-like and transparent, and is then capable of shifting like a ghost from place to place), Riddick is the last surviving Furyan, a race of bad motor scooters who were thoroughly Necromongered some time back, but put up one hell of a fight. It seems there's a prophecy, uh-huh, you betcha!, that only a Furyan can kill the leader of the Necromongers, the Lord Marshall (Colm Feore, who played a much scarier

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villain, Andre Linoge, in Stephen King's *Storm of the Century*).

If you think that gives the ending away.... Wow! You've seen this, haven't you?

Before Riddick can generate much of a reaction to Aereon's announcement, here come the Necromongers laying waste to Helion Prime. At about the same time, Riddick discovers that the other person he saved from death in *Pitch Black*, Kyra (Alexa Davalos), a teenage girl who hero-worshipped him, now bloomed into a supermodel lookalike who loves him, has followed in his footsteps along the path of criminality and is currently imprisoned in an underground maximum security facility on a planet known as Crematoria. It should be clear by this juncture that in Twohy's universe, the thing *is* the name, the name *is* the thing, and thus it's a solid bet that Crematoria is going to be a tad on the warm side. Putting the Necromonger problem on hold — and it's a fairly urgent problem, since they're preparing to turn Helion Prime into space junk — Riddick lets himself be hauled off to Crematoria by the bounty hunters, who plan to sell him to the prison.

(Perhaps I wasn't paying close enough attention, but the rationale underlying the practice of prisons buying their prisoners eluded me — I decided it was time to put into practice the exercises I had learned from reading *Multiplexity*. As a result, though not completely successful in penetrating *CoR*'s mysteries, I did manage to comprehend much of what followed.)

The Crematoria segment, embodying the pulp crunchiness of Twohy's previous films, is the best part of *CoR*. Watching Riddick interact ultraviolently with his fellow prisoners, reconnect with Kyra, and tame two ferocious mutant pangolins (the prison's guard dogs) all makes for good genre fun. But then, after busting out of the underground complex, Kyra, Riddick, and a small group of convicts flee across the plantetary surface, seeking to outrun the sunrise, which on Crematoria brings 700 plus degrees of heat, and.... Well, if not for the puissant wisdom of *Multiplexity*, I might have been unwarrantedly dismissive when our hero and heroine manage to avoid cremation by hiding behind a rock. Newly confident of the movie's genius, however, I assumed this to be no ordinary rock, but one that emitted cool rays. Once back on Helion Prime, when the evil Necromongers imprison Aereon

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by clipping a ball and chain to her leg, not once did I believe that this might prove ineffective, like chaining fog — I understood that a special metal must be involved. Why does Riddick's dialogue consist entirely of tough-guy one-liners? Ritual Furyan warrior-speak. Why do Necromongers sound like actors reciting lines from a draft of a bad Shakespearean play? Bad Shakespeare is a pop culture item on planet Necro (If you've watched enough *Star Trek*, you'll likely tumble to this), and that may also explain the popularity among the Necromongers of armor that looks to have been scavenged from a Cinecitta dumpster, and the use of swords and axes for dueling in a high-tech culture. Continuity errors; the random, pointless appearances of Dame Judi; the pagan-temple-meets-Terry-Gilliam design of the Necromongers' decor and technology; they all make elegant sense when you utilize the proper comic book logic.

I will admit that there were spots when I lapsed into the mode of ordinary human being and was baffled by all I heard and saw. For instance, when one of the Necromongers says, "Take him back to the ship for mind regression," I (a) thought that the comment might have been directed toward me and (b) felt that the instruction was somewhat redundant. Once in a while, as I watched Diesel grunt and swagger, I had the impression that the survival of mankind was dependent upon the efficacy of the steroids abused by a grumpy personal trainer. And I had trouble understanding the purpose that informed Twohy's quotes from various other genre films. To list but a few: storm troopers in *Star Wars* armor; quaintly retrofitted, begoggled human hound dogs called "sniffers" who bring to mind *Twelve Monkeys* and *Brazil*; the ending of *Conan the Barbarian*. According to *Multiplexity*, the reason for my lack of understanding — I did not come sufficiently pure to the experience.

The final scenes, most of them on board the Necromonger flagship, are enlivened by Thandie Newton's performance as Lady MacBeth-ish Dame Vaako, who throughout the movie manipulates and motivates her husband, Lord Vaako (Karl Urban, Eomer in *The Lord of the Rings*), to initiate regime change and make a move on the Lord Marshall. But that's easier said than done. For one thing, Lord Vaako, a man sporting maybe the worst mullet ever, is not the sharpest tack in the box. For

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another, the Lord Marshall, alone of all the Necromongers, has traveled to the Underverse and there gained the power to snatch a person's soul out of their flesh (which may explain why it's so compelling a tourist attraction). You might think that this power makes him a heavy betting favorite when the time for the big showdown with Riddick arrives, but my *Multiplexity* exercises helped me to understand that the souls of Furyans come equipped with extra stickum and, though the Lord Marshall can yank a regular ol' soul from the body easy as pulling a tissue from a box of Kleenex, I knew that when he grabbed hold of Riddick's animating principle, it was going to be more like tweezing a rattler out of a steam pipe.

Thanks to *Multiplexity*, I've come not only to enjoy the summer movies, but have learned to open myself to their simple profundities. And when understanding is not possible, as happens with the greatest of these films, films whose potency is beyond articulation, I heed the Author's advice, perform a certain muscular ritual that is only slightly painful and removes all desire for decent dialogue or continuity, and just let the pretty pictures crush my skull. As for my take on Twohy's latest, well, it's no *Battlefield Earth*. We can't hope for that until Travolta pulls off his long-promised sequel. But in the meantime, I doubt any movie is going to get you closer to that particular slice of heaven than *The Chronicles of Riddick*.

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*John Morressy reports from his New England home that he is hard at work on several stories of a fantastic sort. His latest tale is a charming fantasy that brims with good advice—and surely it's just a coincidence that the story carries a sting in its tale that seems appropriate for an election year....*

# Walter and the Wonderful Watch

## By John Morressy

WHEN WALTER DECIDED TO go out into the world and seek his fortune, his parents were much relieved. "It's about time somebody in this family tried to make a living," they said.

Walter was their youngest son. He was a good lad, but the family were pressed for room. There were twenty-one children about the house, every one of them lazy, silly, and useless. A floating population of cousins, uncles, and aunts came for surprise visits and stayed on for months. Strangers showed up, lost themselves in the crowd, and hung about for weeks. Since Walter's family lived in a two-room hut, things were crowded.

"Do you have any advice for me, Papa?" Walter asked as he packed his few belongings.

"Yes. Find a nice place of your own, and stay there," his father said.

"And invite your brothers and sisters to stay with you," his mother added.

An uncle who was standing by the doorway said, "I have a piece of advice for you, young man: Don't ever talk to strangers."

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"If I don't talk to strangers, how will I ask directions and find a job?" Walter asked.

"I have another piece of advice: Don't be a wiseguy," the uncle said, and stalked outside to take a nap.

"If you're going to seek your fortune, there's no sense wasting time gabbing. You'd better get started right away," Walter's father said, guiding him toward the door.

Walter's cousin George, a feckless, good-natured fellow with a dread of work, looked up from his comfortable seat by the fire and called out, "You can't send a lad like Walter out into the world without a penny in his pocket."

"Why not? That's how he came into it," his father said.

"He didn't even have a pocket," his mother added.

Ignoring them, George said, "I have a present for you, Walter. My father gave it to me when he still believed I might get a job."

He reached into an inside pocket and took out a large object in the shape of a watch. Its color was a deep dull black. "Could do with a bit of polishing," he said as he snapped the lid open. The hands were at nineteen minutes after one. It was now shortly after dawn. Walter took the watch and gently shook it. Nothing happened.

"Is it working?" he asked.

"It's accurate twice a day, without fail. That's more than you can say for most watches. Take good care of it, my boy."

Walter started to say his good-byes, but his parents took him by the elbows and guided him to the door. With a shout of gratitude to Cousin George, he set out for the royal city.

The day was sunny and warm, and after he had walked for several hours Walter stopped to rest. The sun was directly overhead, so he judged that it was twelve o'clock. He decided to set the watch and wind it, and see if it would keep correct time. When he was done, the watch began to tick away confidently.

"You sound like a good watch," Walter said. "I hope you're dependable."

"Of course I am. Just keep me wound," said the watch.

"I beg your pardon. Did you speak to me?"

"I responded to your conversational overture. It was the polite thing to do."

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"I never knew watches could talk," said Walter.

"Have you never heard the saying, 'Time will tell'?"

"I didn't know that's what it meant."

"Well, now you do," said the watch. "You've learned a valuable lesson today, and it's barely past noon."

"Is there anything else you can tell me?" Walter asked.

"Oh, all sorts of things. To begin with, I can tell you that you've set me eleven minutes slow."

"I'll fix that right away," said Walter. And he did.

"That's much better. It makes one feel so good to be accurate," said the watch.

"Why is it that you're talking to me?" Walter asked. "I know, 'Time will tell,' but I never heard you talk when we were at the house. Other watches don't say anything. I've never heard of a watch talking to someone."

"It pains me to admit it, my boy, but the truth is that timepieces in general are rather dull. One would think they'd make timely remarks on every conceivable subject, but they do not. A sundial or an hourglass can bore you to tears, and most watches and clocks are content to chime, or ring bells, or have little figures parade in and out on the hour. The same thing, day after day after day. Limited resources and no imagination at all. Pitiful. But a few of us have cultivated the art of conversation and developed our social skills."

As they walked along, the watch diverted Walter with anecdote, song, and story. It was a wise and witty watch and a pleasant companion. Walter felt that he was getting an education. He began to entertain ideas of a future in which he became immensely successful while the watch saw to all the work.

They came at last to the royal city, where they found all the statues and public buildings draped in black and all the people looking downcast. Walter's spirits sank.

"It looks as though we arrived at a bad time," he said.

"Allow me to be the judge of that," said the watch. "First find out what's happening."

Walter stopped a man passing by and asked the cause of this gloom. "It's the king," the man said.

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"Is he dead?" Walter asked.

"No," said the man with a sigh of regret. "He's bored. He's run out of amusements, and that makes him fretful. He's already raised taxes twice this month. He's liable to start a war any day now."

"A war!" Walter cried in alarm. "Who's the enemy?"

"He's still deciding," said the man.

The king, Walter quickly learned, was not a good king. He was spoiled and self-indulgent and cruel. He spent most of the royal treasury on toys, games, and trinkets for himself. As long as his playthings kept him amused, he ignored the people; but when he grew bored, he started meddling in public affairs. He threw people in dungeons, cut off heads, raised taxes, started wars, and generally made himself a nuisance until some new diversion caught his fancy.

That night, in his room in a squalid shed behind the inn, Walter said to the watch, "I think we've come to the wrong place."

"Nonsense, my boy," said the watch. "This is your great opportunity."

"To get my head cut off?"

"No, no, no. To make your fortune. We must see the king tomorrow."

"I'll never be admitted to the palace!"

"Trust me, Walter."

"But I don't know how to talk to a king. I just want a job."

"Leave everything to me and do as I say," said the watch. "Before we go, you'd better polish me up. And while you're at it, make yourself presentable."

The next morning, having washed his face and hands and shaken much of the dust from his clothes, Walter went to the palace and asked to be admitted. The guard at the gate barred his way.

"No beggars or peddlers allowed," said the guard.

"I'm not a beggar or a peddler. I bring a present for the king," Walter replied.

The guard looked down at him in scorn. "What is it, a lump of dirt?"

Walter repeated the words that the watch had taught him that very morning. "Time lies heavy on the king's hands. I bring a present that will make him very happy. And if the king is happy, he'll make you and me happy. So take me to him at once."

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The guard thought that over for a minute, then said, "All right. But if your present doesn't make the king happy, then the king and I are going to make you very *un*happy."

He let Walter enter. Another guard led him down a long series of corridors, all cluttered with broken toys and abandoned playthings, until they reached the throne room where the king sat sulking.

"Your Majesty, I bring a youth with a present for you," the guard announced.

The king looked at Walter and turned away with a scowl of disdain. "What could this grubby urchin possibly have that would interest us?" he asked.

"A watch, Your Majesty," said Walter.

"We are a king, you stupid boy. We have a thousand watches."

"My watch talks," said Walter.

The king's eyes lit up. His scowl vanished. "A talking watch?"

Walter drew the watch from his pocket and held it up. It gleamed most attractively. "Good morning, Your Majesty," it said. "How pleasant to see you looking well."

"It talks! It actually talks!" the king cried. "Give it to us at once."

Walter placed the watch in the king's eager hands. "Speak to us!" the king said.

"As Your Majesty wishes," said the watch. "Would you prefer amusing conversation? Song? A poetry recitation? Minute observations? Second thoughts? A patriotic oration? Jokes and stories?"

"All of them!" cried the king, bouncing up and down on his throne in glee. "Start with amusing conversation. We don't get much of it around here, we can tell you. Our courtiers are a pack of ninnies. We've had nothing but bad times here."

"Oh, Your Majesty, I sympathize profoundly. I know bad times, believe me, and there's nothing more annoying. Noon and Midnight are the absolute worst."

"Really? Why is that?" asked the king.

"They think they're so special. 'High Noon' and 'The Witching Hour' and all that, you know. And the rest are almost as bad. Seven has convinced himself that he's a magic number, and insists on being called 'Lucky.' And Six is nearly as bad, with his constant insistence that he

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should be the basis of our numerical system. He has terrible rows with Ten. Nine and Five keep calling themselves the working man's friends, and they're not on speaking terms with Eight and Four, who claim the same distinction. It's very trying, believe me."

"Aren't there any good times?" the king asked.

"The only times I really like are Two and Three. They don't fuss and complain and demand attention, they just get on with the job."

"What about Ten and Eleven?" the king asked.

"Ten is something of a snob. 'Banker's Hour,' you know. Eleven's a good sort, though. Very friendly. Always ready for a snack and a few minutes chat. Not at all like One."

"What's the problem with One?"

"He's a loner. Very unsociable."

"This is delightful! Fascinating!" said the king. "We haven't enjoyed such amusing conversation for years."

"Oh, this is nothing. Why, I know a chronometer who can spin tales of the sea for days on end without repeating himself once. It's a pity Your Majesty can't slip away from the palace for a few days."

"We are the king, and we can do whatever we want. Where would you take us? Someplace amusing, we trust."

"Your Majesty would have the time of his life," said the watch.

"Then let us depart at once. We will summon the royal carriage."

"No need, Your Majesty. I have a winged chariot. It's much faster and the view is marvelous. You'll find it most diverting."

At the very instant the watch spoke, a massive winged chariot appeared in the upper reaches of the throneroom and slowly circled down, to alight silently at the foot of the throne. The king stamped his feet in excitement and cried, "Oh, this is wonderful! Wonderful!"

"Before we depart, I must bid farewell to my former master," said the watch.

"That wretched boy? Be quick about it," said the king.

Once back in Walter's hand, the watch whispered, "The king and I will be taking a long journey. Seize your opportunity, my friend."

"What opportunity?"

"Once we leave, the throne will be vacant. Permanently. Seat yourself firmly upon it and declare yourself the new ruler. Command the guards to

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swear their allegiance to you. Hold your coronation this very afternoon. Release all prisoners and announce that the dungeons are closed until further notice and there will be no more squandering of the treasury on playthings, no new taxes, and no more wars. The people will love you, and your family will be very happy in the palace. It has eleven hundred rooms."

"I don't understand. What's going on?"

"My boy, I am no ordinary watch. I'm not really a watch at all. I'm a special agent of Father Time."

"Your disguise is brilliant!" Walter said.

"Thank you. I've been on this king's track for many years. If your cousin George hadn't let me run down, I would have brought him in long ago."

"In where? Where are you going?"

"To the Hall of Chronological Justice. The king is a wanted man. He has not only abused and wasted time, he has actually killed it, and then boasted of the murder. He has much to answer for."

"Won't you ever bring him back?"

"Time flies, my boy. But only in one direction. Goodbye, and good luck in your new job."

"But I don't know how to be a king!" Walter said in growing panic.

"Have no fear. Time is on your side."

"You are keeping us waiting!" the king cried.

Walter ran to him and held out the watch. The king snatched it. Clutching it in both hands, he sprang into the chariot, which at once took wing and soared up and out one of the high windows. As the guards stood gaping, Walter ran to the empty throne, took up the abandoned scepter, and declared himself King Walter the First. The guards hesitated for a moment, exchanged a glance, then a nod, and then dropped to one knee and swore their allegiance. With a guard on each side, Walter went to the grand balcony and proclaimed his accession. The people cheered. He declared his policies, and they became ecstatic. His coronation, that very afternoon, was the happiest event within the memory of anyone living in the royal city.

He installed his brothers and sisters, cousins, uncles, aunts, and visitors in the palace and bestowed titles on each one. They were as lazy,

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silly, and useless as ever, but since they were now noblemen and noblewomen, the people found their ways fascinating, and followed their escapades with great delight.

Walter turned out to be a very decent king. He kept his promises, declared plenty of holidays, and made certain that all the clocks in the kingdom were kept in good repair. To the very end of his days, he was a model of punctuality.

*"Look, do you want to get airborne or not?"*

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*Michael Libling's efforts lately have been divided between work on a novel and assisting his wife Pat with her new gluten-free baking enterprise. (No comments from Mr. Libling on the subject of how much work goes into testing the brownies and biscotti, but he will admit that he learned hard lessons from his youth when he was a literal kid in a candy store.) The author of such stories as "The Fourth Kiss" and "Timmy Gobel's Bug Jar," Michael Libling sets the mood for the holiday season by reminding us we're also entering the darkest time of year.*

# Christmas in the Catskills

## *By Michael Libling*

SOME CHRISTMAS THIS WAS shaping up to be.

All because of a little chocolate shop in Sturvis.

And then, to top it off, something started eating their car.

"Way to go, Livvy. Way to go."

Of course, Rick could just as easily have blamed *Bon Appétit*, where Livvy learned about "the most glorious, utterly heavenly, hand-dipped chocolates" in the first place. And though, mouth full, he admitted to her they were worth the detour — the dark mounds of caramel, marshmallow and cashews were something else — there was no end to his carping. "Hell, look at it out there."

"Try a chocolate cherry," Livvy replied. She did not remind him that taking the back roads had been his idea, not hers. In summer, you could save a good hour by cutting through the mountains. In winter, you just never knew. Had they driven straight through to Chartersburg, stuck with the interstate same as always, they might well have avoided the worst of it.

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There had been flurries off and on since they'd left Manhattan, but nothing to suggest what was brewing up ahead. The radio station out of Albany hadn't even clued in. They claimed the clouds would be gone by noon, assuring Santa starry skies to light his way. Sunshine was promised for Christmas Day, but with below average temperatures. *Frigid* is the word the jock used, followed by some quip about an ex-wife, and then he, his sidekick and the traffic girl cracked up, giggled nonstop till Livvy switched to NPR and some biddy's reminiscence of turkey stuffing and candied yams.

"C'mon, Liv, those guys were a riot."

They couldn't have been more than twenty minutes out of Sturvis when the road up and vanished on them. Blizzard white. Out of nowhere. Like that.

"If God wanted to start over from scratch," Livvy observed, "this would make a fitting first page, don't you think?"

"Yeah. Sure." Rick often claimed deciphering Livvy was like being back in high school lit class, reading stuff that took forever to get to whatever it was the writer wanted to say.

He maneuvered the Malibu as far off to the side of the road as he dared. "Next thing we know — my luck — some asshole'll crash into us."

Livvy feigned agreement. There hadn't been much traffic — three cars at most. Pickups actually. *Assholes* were few and far between. "It'll probably blow over before too long." She slipped the lid of the chocolate box back into place. "At least we won't starve." She parted Rick's grimace with a morsel of marzipan.

Rick stared at the gas gauge, the needle on the downward slope. Slowly, his gaze shifted to his wife's belly. She smiled. Every worst-case scenario and cheesy movie of the week ran through her head. *What would he do? Get delivery instructions via cell phone?*

She deposited the chocolates among the gifts stacked across the back seat — a sentimental rainbow of wrappings, ribbons and bows. "Too darn pretty to open," Rick's family would say, as they ripped them apart. Most would have arrived at the cabin by now, going about their respective rituals. No doubt the tree was already up, though the decorating wouldn't begin till Rick and Livvy showed. Rick's dad claimed her eggnog was the fuel of creative tinseling. (It was also the old fart's fuel for copping a feel

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every chance he got. "He's just being friendly," Rick liked to say.) Meantime, if the snow wasn't blowing, Rick's older brother, Tom, would have cleared a rectangle of ice on the lake and the nieces and nephews would be practicing their figure eights, demolition-derby style. Most likely, too, Rick's mom had begun her vigil. Not for her. *God, no*. But for him. *Her little Ricky*. They weren't overdue yet, but it was getting close. Livvy adjusted her scarf, splayed the fringes across her lap.

"We could be here awhile. Might be best to put on some extra clothes." He looked back to the trunk. "Another pair of socks, a sweater, maybe." He released the lock, but the snow had drifted dead against the door. Livvy tried hers. The same.

"Great. Just great."

He eased down on the accelerator, shifted back and forth between D and R, but the tires only spun, and the rocking fishtailed them deeper into the bank.

"Damn." He slammed the steering wheel with the heel of his hand. "Should've forked over the extra fifty for that 4 X 4 instead of this piece of crap. And then you know what would've happened? Not a damn thing. Not a goddamn snowflake. Clear roads all the way and back...."

Livvy brushed sandy bangs from blue eyes, an impish grin upon glossy pink lips. She knew she should bide her time till his tantrum passed, but she could not resist: "I had no idea, Mr. Hollis, your choice of rental vehicle impacted so dramatically on the weather."

He turned to her, questioning, and gave up without even trying to make sense of what she'd said. "Can you believe this?" The face of his cell phone smirked *No Service*. He began to say something about climbing out the window when the car lurched forward. And the beast was upon them.

A woolly mammoth on the rampage.

Crunching. Grinding.

Plastic, rubber, metal.

*Chewing, Jesus. Something was eating the car.*

Rick pushed, punched, drove hard against the door. No give. Another jolt. The trunk bucked into the air and the door swung open. He lunged, arms flailing to hold it wide, but his seatbelt reeled him in, and the blizzard slammed the exit dead. Down they came, the bumper ripped from the chassis, so much flesh from a leg of lamb.

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They tried the windows, but the switches clicked lifeless.

A retort from the right. Another from the left. "The tires," Rick shouted, as though the realization would somehow reassure. But Livvy's attention had moved to the crackling from the rear — spider legs racing through the glass. And the window disintegrated.

Shreds of socks, shirts, and sweaters flew into and out of view, Jackson Pollock flicking color on the canvas of the storm.

Paper and ribbons whipped about, a whirlwind of confetti in search of bride and groom.

Cold lacerated their necks, scored their spines. The smell of gasoline filled their nostrils.

He pounded at the door. Kicked at the glass.

*They had to get out. But how?*

She caught the bottle as it rolled from under her seat, grabbed it up and pressed the neck into his fist. Rick gawked. *The wine for Tom. What the...? Oh, God, yeah.* "Cover yourself," he hollered amid the din, and Livvy pulled her ski jacket up and over her head as he swung the bottle against the windshield.

But the windshield only smiled back, laugh lines creeping to Chevy scalp, ears, and chin. A sardonic half-circle of contempt. Taunting. Breath cool. Eddies of spittle filtering through as white as — as white as snow.

Again Rick swung and the bottle popped a near-perfect circle. Diagrammatic phases of the Moon playing across their windshield. And the jaws roared closer.

Once more. A larger hole. And then he kicked. Both feet. Frantic. Pumping. Doc Marten heels, Doc Marten toes. And then another swing of the bottle. A two-fisted swing. A Barry Bonds swing. And a rush of burgundy glass and snow exploded down on them, and over the dash and onto the hood he clambered.

Flat on his belly, feet and legs scrabbling for friction, he pivoted about, the wind pummeling him as he discarded the jagged neck of the bottle for the arm of the wiper blade. Down and in he reached for her.

Livvy grasped his hand.

Rose toward the opening.

And the airbags erupted.

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The boy's eyes are on the door before it opens. *What is it Mama once said? Markus's ears are so big, he could pick a flea fart out of the dark at half a mile and tell you whose dog it had drunk to boot.* Nothing gets past Markus.

The oskerei shriek from the belly of the storm as Papa emerges from the hastening dark into the yellowed gloom of the meeting hall. Close behind, on either side, a man and woman follow. His eyes are darting, head jerky. A chicken pecking feed. Knowing how Papa reels them in, this is to be expected. But the woman appears not to be rattled at all. Tired, surely. Exhausted, yeah. But most apparent is her curiosity. Eyes wide. Smile slight and tentative.

"She's pretty," Krissy whispers.

Markus nods. *And bring hither the fatted calf, and kill it; and let us eat, and be merry. Luke 15:23.* "I think she's going to have a baby."

Krissy's eyes widen. "Like Mary and Joseph?" Her jaw drops so low, her chin is lost for a moment in the hollow of her neck.

"Yeah. I guess."

"Think they're ours?"

Markus shrugs, watches as Papa helps the woman off with her jacket. The jacket is stained. Her slacks, too. Blood, maybe. Same with the man. Big bloody stains.

"Better set two more places," Markus says, and resumes his trek down the length of the table, folding the napkins, while Krissy follows with forks, spoons and knives. The Slungard girls — Beate and Birgitte — and Simen Midkil are doing the same on the opposite side, though Simen's folding isn't near as crisp as Markus's. Fourth year running it has been his job. Since he turned twelve. He will not be surprised when he is asked to refold Simen's.

Mama is happy to see Papa, but the others go about their business, never having doubted he would come through. Only the outsiders reveal any interest, observing from their benches and chairs, parochial clusters of anecdote, hearsay and tankards of Mr. Ansgar's juleòl — his famous Christmas beer.

Papa stomps the snow from his boots so the whole room quakes and then, voice sobby, head bowed, he declares, "I almost killed them." His remorse is convincing to anyone who doesn't know any better. The

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newcomers bob their heads in weary confirmation, the man flexing his fists, the woman going so far as to give Papa a forgiving pat on the shoulder. What is it Mama once said? *Papa could rob a bank barefaced and, on the same visit, charm the manager into opening a savings account for him.*

Papa's announcement does the trick. Most everyone crowds around for details, something to pass time till dinner. Even Mrs. Slungard and Mrs. Ingstad poke their heads from the kitchen. *Has their rib roast ever smelled finer?*

Satisfied with the attention, Papa urges restraint, says the story will have to wait till Rick and Livvy are feeling up to it.

"Is Livvy the girl or boy?" Krissy asks.

"The girl, I think," Markus says.

"It's a funny name."

"Yeah. I guess." The woman removes her knit hat. Light brown hair spills out. *Gosh, she really is pretty. Fat or not. Funny name or not.* Maybe prettier than anyone Markus has ever seen.

The outsiders rescued earlier are especially animated now. Never fails, getting stranded brings them together. *Camaraderie* is what Papa calls it. Weird how it works. Strangers. Nothing in common. Until Christmas Eve and Grimsdal.

Some wander close, introduce themselves to the newcomers. Each has a story to share. Abridged versions of how their Christmas came undone. Snow. Ice. Accident. Wrong turn. Car trouble. Flats. Freak this or freak that. *The usual.* Every story topping the one that came before, every detail played to the hilt, and plenty of chuckling, groaning, and head-shaking thrown in for color. But, as Papa warned, Rick and Livvy aren't up to chatting. Rick is beyond jittery, like he's a chestnut twitching in a fire fixing to blow.

"You should let the family know where we are," Livvy says. "Your mother will be worried sick." Odd. Despite her words, there is a calm about her. Rick's mother may be worried sick, but this Livvy is not.

Papa leads Rick to the back to use the phone. The lines are down, of course, but Rick doesn't know it. He assumes it is only his phone that's on the blink.

Mama brings Livvy a blanket and coffee. Livvy thanks her, but asks for a cup of hot water instead. "Or herbal tea. Mint or lemon, perhaps? I

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try to avoid caffeine — you know, because of the baby." Her voice is as soft and smooth as Christmas cream. She also asks if there's somewhere she might freshen up.

Krissy waits till Livvy is out of earshot. "Is she — are they going to be ours?"

Mama wags an impatient finger. "You've still the glasses to do, young lady. Look, Beate and Birgitte are almost done with theirs."

NOW THAT MRS. ANSGAR is gone, the candles are Mama's domain. She has spent the year making them. Big, fat hurricane candles. Candles that burn down the middle, leaving an outer shell to protect the receding flame. Guaranteed to last the night and then some.

Mrs. Ansgar went faster than most. Dead before New Year's last she was. Mr. Ansgar blamed himself and rightly so. Knocked his wife's candle over changing a light bulb, he did. Not that anyone was surprised, seeing how he'd been into his juleòl since lunchtime on the day. And though he set a match to the candle quick as a lightning, there was no escaping what he had done. Some said his trying to cover up was the reason she went so fast. On the other hand, had the Ansgars a guest to see them through the night, Mrs. Ansgar would have been spared. They weren't the only ones without a guest, just the only unlucky ones. It had been a lean year for outsiders. Bad weather wasn't confined to Grimsdal and the mountains. Word was, storms kept people off the roads clear across the state. Then again, why Mr. Ansgar needed to change a light bulb with two Christmas candles burning never made much sense to begin with. Made people talk, it did.

Mama's task is to make certain each family returns home with their fair allotment for the night. The arrival of Rick and Livvy has bumped the number of outsiders to fifteen — a measure of comfort, to be sure, and more than double last year's sorry total — but still far from the ideal. Twenty-seven Grimsfolk remain, after all.

Mama holds the tongs at arm's length as she lifts the candles from the tub. She adds three to the four already in the Skarran basket. "They *are* coming with us," Markus tells Krissy. "They are."

It is only fair, since Papa rescued them. Markus is surprised, though;

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Mama has given the baby in Livvy's tummy a candle of its own. *So there are sixteen outsiders then.*

Livvy warms herself by the smallest of the four Franklins that heat the meeting hall. *Mary in the manger.* As though Grimsdal had been in her plans all along, rather than the other way around. Behind her, at the windows, cloaked in darkness, the oskerei grow testy, the panes frosted thick with the vapors of their breath, errant etchings of feathers and claws.

Rick paces. The weathered floorboards of his imaginary cage creak underfoot. "Some Christmas this is shaping up to be." He jiggles his cell phone, slaps it against his palm, his hip, twists it this way and that, invoking a higher power to bless him with service. Rick's actions, Markus thinks, are what Papa meant when he said some people are unable to accept their fate, blinded by the myth of free will. *The very hairs of your head are numbered. Matthew 10:29.* "Damn it. Should never have stopped at that stupid chocolate shop. You and your damn cooking magazines...."

"No one stopped you from returning to the Interstate," his wife reminds him.

"So we'd be stuck in some other shithole instead of here. Christ, I can't believe...."

"Lower your voice. Everything is going to be fine. These are good people...."

"Are you out of your mind? The guy almost killed us."

"...And do you smell what's coming from the kitchen? It's going to be wonderful. You wait and see, a year from now we'll be laughing about this. You'll see. You'll see."

"And my mother?" He grips the cell phone, forefinger itching for a trigger. "How do you think she's feeling right now?"

"The opposite of how she'll feel tomorrow when she learns we're safe. Things work out. They always do."

But Rick blathers on until Livvy levels him with a poke in the ribs. "You are making an ass of yourself." Cheeks red, she looks about to see if there are witnesses. Markus lowers his eyes, focuses on the refolding of Simen Midkil's napkins.

"But that guy could have killed us...."

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The skinny outsider, the one wearing the Star of Bethlehem tie, ambles over to Rick and offers him a tankard of beer. Rick doesn't have to be asked twice. He sips. Grins approval. Takes a gulp. And retreats to a corner, joining with two other men to learn what more they may have in common, besides this place, their misfortune and this night of all nights.

Livvy sighs. A nice warm bath sort of sigh.

Krissy arrives with the tea. Introduces herself.

Livvy inhales the steam, then sets the mug down beside her. "Nice to meet you, Kristine." She shakes the girl's hand with excessive formality, the way outsiders often do to impress sincerity on children. "I'm Livvy."

"That's a funny name."

"It's short for Olivia."

"That's a funny name too."

"Yes, I suppose. It's not too common anymore."

"Is that blood all over you?"

"No. Wine."

"I don't like wine."

"You never know, it might save your life someday."

"Huh?"

"It's a long story."

"My brother says you're going to have a baby."

"He's right. About two months from today, as a matter of fact." *Tap. Tap.* Livvy raps her knuckles against the wood of the bench.

"Would it be okay if I — if I touched it?"

"Be my guest." Livvy leans back, closer to the window, her tummy prominent beneath the winter knit — white snowflakes on a sky of impossible blue. Outside, the oskerei are surely licking their chops, smacking their lips.

"A boy baby or girl baby?"

"I don't know."

"I like girls best."

"It doesn't matter to me. As long as she or he is healthy, I'll be happy."

"Mama has a candle for your baby."

"Really?" Livvy smiles. "That's so sweet. I'll have to thank her." She surveys the room in search of Mama and catches Markus watching. Her

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smile grows broader, but he gives her nothing in return and she looks away, unease crinkling the corners of her eyes. Markus already knows what his sister must learn: It is not good to become attached to an outsider. Still, maybe he should have smiled. Should not have been so harsh.

Livvy raises the mug, peers over the rim, awareness dawning. "Why are there no decorations, Kristine? No Christmas tree?"

"We have candles."

"Yes, I know. But what about presents? And Santa?"

"Julenisse does not come to Grimsdal." Krissy leans in close. Markus cranes to hear. "Because of the oskerei."

"Oscar's eye?" Livvy is puzzled. *Krissy should shut up. Markus should pull her away.* "You mean Oscar the Grouch, like on *Sesame Street*?"

"What's *Sesame Street*?" Krissy asks, and Markus wonders the same.

Mrs. Ingstad clangs the stewpot with a ladle. Dinner.

Mama directs the seating. Outsiders are placed with the families with whom they'll be spending the night.

The doors of the kitchen fling wide and Mrs. Slungard and Mrs. Ingstad lead the procession of dishes and delights. The aromas are dizzying.

Papa cues grace.

Heads bow.

Hands clasp.

Eyes shut.

Mouths water.

Nostrils twitch.

Appetites run giddy.

Old Mr. Ansgar eases into his auctioneer twang: "In Jesus' name, we gather to eat and to drink and to give thanks to God...."

Markus settles in for the long haul. Peeks. Sees Livvy doing the same. She looks at him. But she is cautious now, does not allow herself to smile.

"Pray He protect our souls. Amen."

*Amen*? *That's it*? Markus can hardly believe his ears — his big ears. He is not alone. The break with tradition is startling. No one knows what

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to do. In years past, grace would ramble on so long, Mrs. Ansgar would interject a premature amen. But Mr. Ansgar is not the same without his wife. He has not so much as sampled the beer he brews. "Let's eat," he says. There is no protest. "Let this night be done."

HERRING. LUTEFISK WITH mustard sauce and melted goat cheese. Trout and salmon. Sausages and sausage patties. Boiled potatoes and corn. Stewed peas. Spiced cabbage. Cranberries. Flatbread—buttery crosses glistening on crisp crusts. Ramekins of creamery butter. And the rib roast. *The magnificent rib roast.* With crackling.

Sure enough, the outsiders dive right in, raves and food bits sputtered between bouts of rabid feasting. Everyone wants the story behind this dish or that. "Norse traditions." Mrs. Slungard has never been one to share her secrets. "Recipes handed down from mother to daughter. Meat. Fish. Vegetables. Eggs. Flour. Butter."

Mrs. Ingstad isn't any more forthcoming. She points to the lutefisk. "Some prefer to boil the cod, but baking cooks away the fishiness."

No headway on the recipes, the outsiders shift to questions of Grimsdal. Papa, Mama and the others field them same way as years gone by.

*From where?*

"Norway to Newfoundland. Newfoundland to New Brunswick. New Brunswick to Maine. Maine to here."

*Really? How interesting! When?*

"At the turn of the century. The last century."

*Why?*

"Religious persecution."

*Oh.*

Never fails. Talk of religion takes them down a notch, inspiring compassionate nods and topics better suited to aimless chit-chat and the festive season. Recipes, for instance. Except, this year, there is this Livvy. No stopping her. "Who was persecuting you? And just in Norway or are you saying over here as well?"

"Not *who*. *What*." Mr. Ansgar jumps in before anyone has had a chance to think an answer through. "The oskerei are a *what*."

Right away, the Grimsfolk twiddle fingers alongside ears, displaying

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the extent of Mr. Ansgar's sanity. Krissy sticks out her tongue for added flavor. Constipated smiles abound.

Mr. Ansgar ignores them all, wags a meaty rib at Livvy like he's conducting a symphony in a slaughterhouse. "We couldn't escape 'em then, can't now. They'll take us one by one, they will." His rib sags to his plate, slips into a bed of potatoes and mushy peas. He raises greasy hands to stem his tears. "Freya, my poor Freya."

Forks rest. Tongues click in sympathy for the losses the old-timer has suffered, both wife and mind. But the lull is fleeting. *Look at all this food.* Rick calls for the platter of trout and his buddy, the guy with the Star of Bethlehem tie, pleads for sausage. And though it is plain Livvy has plenty more to ask, feasting prevails.

Second helpings.

Third helpings.

Too many helpings to count.

By the time Christmas cream is served, all defenses are down. The outsiders feel they have known their hosts for years, if not forever.

Papa winks. Markus lets himself smile. All is going well. So well, in fact, Markus turns to Livvy, lets her see his mouth in all its toothsome glory. She returns the smile.

*Best night of the year.*

*Worst night of the year.*

*Just nothing like Christmas.*

"So I'm out cold in the snow, lying there — what? I dunno — ten seconds, ten minutes? Not a clue, man." Rick holds a tankard and the floor, his left hand carving the highlights of his tale. The story will surely get bigger and better with repeated telling, should he have the chance. *The words of a wise man's mouth are gracious; but the lips of a fool will swallow up himself. Ecclesiastes 10:12.*

"First thing I notice is this chocolate sitting on my chest. Yeah, a chocolate. Right here. But then I realize something's missing. There's no crunch. The thing has stopped eating the car. And then, I think — jeez — Livvy.

"I'm on my feet in a flash. But I can't tell up from down. I mean, this storm isn't letting up. And I don't know if it's Earth or sky rushing at me.

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That's when Ulf here — Mr. Skarran — catches me. 'Hey, mister, you all right?' he says. And I'm thinking I've come face to face with a talking grizzly, for Christ — for crying out loud. I mean, look at the man."

Papa feigns embarrassment.

"Ever see anybody hairier? But then I realize grizzlies don't wear mittens. And then I say.... Jeez, what did I say, Ulf?" Rick quaffs his beer as if it's his first.

"'My wife.'" Papa blots cream from his beard and moustache. "'Where's my wife?' That's what he said."

"And then Livvy here calls out...."

Livvy blushes, accepts her husband's handoff with reluctance, her voice almost inaudible. "'Get me out.'"

Rick sets down his beer, loses his hands in his pockets. "I got to tell you, when I saw what was left of the Malibu, I nearly shit my — passed out. The hood. The hole where the windshield was. Livvy stuck behind the airbag...."

Mama expresses concern for the baby, but Livvy allays the fear. "I was leaning forward when the airbag went. My shoulders took most of the blow."

"...And seeing Ulf's snow blower — no more than a seatback from Livvy — and, well, I didn't know what to think. How many screws on that thing, Ulf? Three? Four?"

"Four." Papa hangs his head. Nobody does shame better. "I was heading back when it hit. You never know in these parts. Weather comes from nowhere. Figured I'd do some cleaning up on my way. Never traffic along there. Least of all Christmas Eve. Last I expected was to catch folk roadside. Don't know what I'd have done if I'd...." Mama takes Papa's hand. Nobody does solace better.

"Perhaps it's fate," Livvy says. "Perhaps we were all meant to be here tonight. As frightening as this day has been, I want you to know I have never experienced a more memorable Christmas. I would not trade this day for anything. Thank you. Thank you all so much."

Rick gags up a "God" or a "Jesus" or maybe both, but the seconding of Livvy drowns him out. Glasses and tankards strike gratitude. Hands applaud. And just like that, the enthusiasm gives way to teary-eyed contentment. But it's killing all the fun. *Livvy killed all the fun.* And

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there's no way Rick is going to let it go: "What the hell is this, The Last Supper?" His drinking buddies crack up. "The good news is, the Malibu was only a rental. And best of all, that chocolate on my chest — I ate it." The laughter builds. Until the first window shatters.

There are screams, gasps, but no one moves.

No one speaks.

It is the window by the pot-bellied stove, where Livvy had warmed herself. Not the entire window, only a pane. And then a second and a third and a fourth. Panes popping like the meeting hall is built of bubble-wrap. And a fifth and a sixth and a seventh and an eighth. Until the smashing comes full circle.

Outsiders have been known to dive for cover when the windows go. But not this year's lot. They sit kind of stunned, calves in the aftermath of a mallet to the head. Maybe it's the beer. Maybe the dinner. Or maybe the example set by the pregnant woman whose curiosity would seem to leave no room for fear. No matter how hard he tries, Markus cannot stop looking at her. *Just can't.*

"What the hell was that?" Rick's shirtfront is soaked with beer.

Papa stands, palms raised to allay concern. "Only the storm letting us know it's still got some wallop. Funny thing about our valley, the way it whips up the winds coming down the mountains. Turns gusts into cannonballs, it does."

"Cannonballs, my ass," Mr. Ansgar mutters.

"As good a time as any to call it a night," Mama suggests. The whole table murmurs resigned agreement, the outsiders too, though they have not a clue as to what they are agreeing to.

Some women sweep up the glass, while others clear the table. Mrs. Slungard and Mrs. Ingstad oversee the leftovers.

Men board over the broken panes. Each square of plywood a spot-on fit. Not the first time they have had to deal with the problem. Not even close. Outsiders volunteer to help, but the Grimsfolk won't hear of it, and they return to their clusters, shared tales of freak weather now the topic of choice. *Hailstones big as tennis balls. Winds so strong, the roots of trees ended up where the branches should've been. Rain so heavy, so fast, folks drowned in their beds.*

Before heading out, all stop by Mama's table to fetch their candles.

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Grimsfolk wish her well, jaws set for the night ahead, and Mama wishes them the same. They take their baskets and move on. But the outsiders still think it's some kind of party, tossing *Merry Christmases* so freely you'd think they had some sort of a speech disorder. Like the way Simen Midkil can't get through a sentence without a *you-know* or two.

When all are gone, Krissy asks Mama, "Why do they say Merry Christmas?"

"Because they do not know any better," Mama says, forgetting Livvy stands nearby.

The Moon is a bright three-quarters, with so many stars, you'd think God spilled salt across the sky. "It's strange," Livvy says, "there's not so much as a breeze, yet I can still hear the wind."

Mrs. Skarran nods. "Sometimes, the mountains play tricks on the ears." Ulf strides ahead, Markus at his side, Krissy trotting to keep up.

"But listen, I could swear it was right here." Livvy glances back toward the meeting hall, searches the sky. "As if it were blowing all around us."

"God, I could use a smoke." Rick hunches his shoulders against the cold. "Why don't you people put up some decorations, for Christ's sake? It's Christmas, Jesus."

Ulf helps Livvy into the wagon. An ancient Ford International that'd be worth some bucks if it weren't gone to rust.

The ride from the meeting hall is a half-mile, no more. But Livvy takes it all in, striving to make sense of the sights the blizzard had earlier concealed. Cottages, bungalows, and trailer homes scattered among tumbledowns and razed foundations. More homes abandoned than lived in. *This isn't a village, it's a vestige.* "How big is Grimsdal?"

"As big as you see," Mrs. Skarran replies.

"I mean the people. How many live here?"

"You met them tonight."

"All of them?"

"All who are left."

Rick leaps in like he's delivering a lecture to the hard of hearing. "What do you expect when you don't keep up with the times?" Livvy grabs

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his hand, but it doesn't do much good. "Dead towns all over the Catskills these days. And if they're not dead, they're dying. And they deserve it too, I'm telling you. Bring on the Wal-Marts, I say. More the better."

Ulf grips the steering wheel as if he's weighing anchor.

Before her coat is off, Mrs. Skarran sets a pot of coffee on the stove. A large pot.

Livvy hangs back, taking the place in. The foyer emerges into a single large room that occupies the main floor of the cottage. The kitchen takes up the wall straight ahead. To the left, a dining area. To the right, a sitting area. In the center of the room, a staircase leads up. *Where did Mrs. Skarran get her decorating ideas? A Steinbeck novel?*

Linoleum dominates. Brown measles pocking beige upon the floors. Swirls of variegated paisley on the walls. Livvy is disappointed that even within the Skarran home there is no Christmas tree, but she is mindful not to bring it up. Unlike Rick, who isn't holding anything back: "Jesus, haven't you people heard of carpets? This place is an icebox." Livvy glares, but he takes no notice. He flops into the armchair. Throws his heels onto the coffee table. "What's Christmas without a tree? And lights? You need colored lights. I'm not saying your beer's no good, but you people could do with some eye candy, if you know what I mean. Jesus, don't tell me you got no TV? How do you know it's New Year's without Dick Clark?" He blusters on till a yawn paralyzes his tongue.

Markus approaches, his head down. "It dropped," he says, the words more retched than spoken. Her scarf sways from his hands. She thanks him, her fingers gliding cross his palm as she takes it. He nods and hurries off. He is big for his age. Sixteen. Seventeen. Eighteen. Somewhere in there. Destined to be a grizzly like his dad. She remembers boys like him from school. At once humorless and humorous. So shy around her. Awkward in their yearning. Not at all like Rick had been.

Krissy carries the basket as Mrs. Skarran takes the candles. She staggers four across one end of the kitchen table, three across the opposite. "Is there significance to the pattern?" Livvy asks, eager to be delighted.

"I guess," Mrs. Skarran says, as though she has never thought much about it. "Ours are here, yours there. I try to set them far enough apart so

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they all burn the same. Wouldn't be fair otherwise. Each must last the night."

"And if they don't?"

"Hell, who wants to last the night in this hole?" Rick can't keep his mouth shut. "What's Christmas without gifts under the tree? And TV? What's Christmas without TV? You got a set upstairs, maybe?"

Markus rams a log into the Franklin.

Again, Livvy attempts to atone for her husband. "Are the candles a Norwegian custom? I'd love to hear the story."

Ulf snatches a candle from the Skarran end of the table. "The story is it's Christmas. And this is what we do. We light candles. That's all there is to it. Save yourself the bother, Mrs. Hollis, don't look for more."

She swallows. Breathes deep. Peers over her belly and counts measles on the linoleum at her feet. Watches in silence as Ulf drags his thumbnail through the candle, leaving his mark.

The candle-lighting does not amount to much. No colorful costumes. No goofy hats, frilly shirts, or embroidered dresses. No quaint songs or chants. No folksy tap-steps, kicks, or pirouettes. No prayers. No Jesus. Nothing for anthropologists to record for posterity.

Ulf strikes a wooden match and lights his candle. Mrs. Skarran, Markus, and Krissy initial their candles and do the same.

Mrs. Skarran offers the box of matches to Rick. "Please."

He hauls himself out of the chair with a bellyful of grunts and reels toward the table. Mrs. Skarran shrieks, afraid he will overshoot the mark, upset the candles. Ulf leaps to intercept, arms extended in the manner of a crossing guard. But Rick steadies himself, pauses, stifles a belch. Livvy reaches for a candle, but Mrs. Skarran stops her. "He must choose his own."

Rick wobbles closer, strains to focus, reaches out.

"Mark it for him," Ulf instructs.

Livvy scratches a ragged R into the wax. She strikes a match, secures it between Rick's thumb and forefinger, and guides his hand to the wick.

Livvy lights two. One for herself, one for her unborn. On the second, she engraves a *B*. "For baby," she explains, though no one has asked.

All watch as the candles flicker, save Rick. He is back in the armchair. Out like a light, funnily enough. Were it not the dead of winter, his snore would be confused for cows lowing in a neighboring pasture.

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The awe with which the Skarrans observe the candles is baffling. Livvy has witnessed more brilliance atop a PriceChopper birthday cake. But then, she wonders, is it awe or something else? Trepidation perhaps? Still, in a voice filled with reverence, she says, "They're beautiful. Really. The simplicity. And Krissy mentioned you make the candles yourself, Mrs. Skarran — for the entire town. Amazing."

"The flames." Mrs. Skarran clasps her hands at her mouth. "They are the harbors of our souls."

"So beautiful. Truly."

"I will show you to your room," Ulf says. "You are tired."

"Please. I'd love to hear the story."

"I told you, there is no story."

"But your wife said the candles must last the night. What if they don't?"

"Then our home will be one candle darker."

They try to rouse Rick from the chair, but he will have none of it. "When he gets like this, it's best to let him sleep it off," Livvy advises. She loosens his shirt and wipes the drool from his chin with his collar. "I'm so sorry. Whenever he has too much to drink — "

"Will he sleep the night is all I want to know," Ulf demands.

"Yes. Usually."

"Usually is not good enough."

Livvy fires back. "Yes, he will sleep the night. And most of the morning too, if I know him. And I do. All too well, I do. Satisfied?"

Ulf nods, backs off, admiration buried within the thinnest of grins. He is hardly the first man to be deceived by Livvy's looks.

They leave Krissy to attend the candles and, Livvy supposes, Rick. But no one explains why the responsibility has fallen to the youngest. What could she do should Rick awake? *Tattle on him*?

Ulf hovers by the stairs. "Sooner we get to bed, the sooner we get to morning."

"Should I check the windows for drafts, Papa?" Markus asks.

"Never hurts," Ulf replies.

Mrs. Skarran hugs her daughter. "Don't forget the coffee. Whenever you think you need it and especially when you don't."

"I know, Mama."

Krissy opens her arms to Livvy, a second hug to spare. Livvy smiles,

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wraps the girl up in her arms. Krissy whispers warm at her ear, "Don't worry. I'll make extra sure your candle doesn't go out. You're too nice to die."

Livvy's legs are jelly. Her heart in her mouth. But none of the others have heard what Krissy has said. And Livvy has no doubt it is best to keep it this way.

How she makes it up the stairs and to her room — Krissy's room — she does not know.

It is Christmas Eve.

She is three days short of seven months pregnant.

She is in a house with people she does not know.

She lies in the bed of a ten-year-old named Kristine. Krissy.

The girl sits below, drinking coffee, watching seven candles burn. *Why isn't she waiting for Santa? She should be waiting for Santa.*

Rick sleeps off his binge in an armchair. Rick. Her husband of four years. *His father must be missing his eggnog. His mother must be worried sick about her baby boy.*

The wind rages, but the branches of the trees do not move.

She should be dead.

*Or is she dead?*

Did Ulf Skarran and his snow-blower grind her to nothingness?

Fresh minced nothingness?

But if, as Krissy said, she is too nice to die, then how can she be dead?

The baby kicks.

Life gets weird sometimes.

So weird.

Eyes on the snow-lit gray of the ceiling. If she has slept, she does not remember a wink of it.

She casts the comforter aside, steps softly into the hall.

*You're too nice to die.*

He hears as she enters his room. Knows it is her without opening his eyes. The way she moves. Breathes. *Thinks.*

She calls his name.

"Please, Markus, tell me. Tell me about the candles."

Lie still, he tells himself. Sleep. *God is faithful, who will not suffer*

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*you to be tempted above that ye are able. 1 Corinthians 10:23.*

"Please." She strokes the back of his hand. "I won't tell anyone."

He wants to touch her. Her hair. Her lips.

"I want to know about the candles."

"No."

"It will be our secret. I promise."

"I can't."

She squeezes his hand. "Tell me, Markus."

"They must burn the night. The whole night."

"And if not?"

"I can't."

She rests her head beside his on the pillow.

"The people whose candles go out...."

"Yes?" she prods.

"I shouldn't."

"Tell me."

"They will be dead before Christmas next."

"Because of a candle, Markus? Surely, you don't believe this? Or your parents? Do you know what a superstition is? An old wives' tale?"

"Mrs. Ansgar was the last. Taking wash down from the line, she was. Wind smacked Mr. Ansgar's overalls into her face. Frozen solid, they were. Drove her nose into her brain, they said. And before her.... Mama and Papa say, in Norway, we once numbered hundreds."

"But think about it, Markus. If this were true, why would anyone be so foolish as to light a candle? If you don't light them, they can't go out. And if they can't go out, no one will die. Don't you see?"

"Because of the oskerei. If we don't light them, they will take us as they please."

"What are you talking about?"

"Listen. They're waiting."

"It's the wind."

"It's them. Do you know Heaven and Hell, Livvy?" Never before has he spoken her name aloud.

"Of course."

"The oskerei — they are the souls God has judged too good for Hell, but not good enough for Heaven. They must roam the in-between for all eternity." He recites the story the way it has always been told to him.

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Same words. Same phrases. Same foreboding. "Unless."

"Unless?"

"They can steal the soul of another. That's what they did in olden times. Swooped down upon the people as they wished. Preyed upon any soul they fancied. Anytime. Until the people begged God to help. And so He came to give the oskerei one night a year."

"Christmas Eve."

"But not even this was good enough. Because now whole villages would be taken on this single night — this one night God had given. Again, the people prayed. And God answered with the candles."

"God has always been partial to candles," Livvy says. "Fires. Burning bushes. Our Pyromaniac, who art in Heaven."

"What?"

"Nothing. Go on."

"The people, they were told to light the candles each Christmas Eve. Those whose burned till sun-up would be protected from the oskerei till Christmas came again, but those whose candles went out would be taken before the year was done."

"It's a good story, Markus, but only that. Were it true, the whole world would know. The oskerei would be everywhere. Christmas Eve would hardly be a joyous occasion."

"It is not joyous." He shakes his head. His nose brushes her ear. He licks his lips, catches his breath. "The oskerei don't care about anybody. Only us."

"The Chosen, so to speak."

"The oskerei want to get to Heaven. Some might not mind Hell — better than Nothing, Papa says — but most want Heaven. So they look for people — souls who will pass through the Gates. Humble people. Righteous people."

"Enter the Grimsfolk...."

"They have been with us since the first candle. No matter where we ran. No matter how hard we prayed. No matter how unhumble or unrighteous we tried to be. There was nothing we could do. Nothing."

"Except find others to take your place."

"Yes." He inhales her hair. Bites his lip.

"Your father plowing into us wasn't an accident, was it?"

"The oskerei help out with the weather."

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"And the others who were stranded?"

"The more outsiders on Christmas, the easier to save our souls. When a Grimsfolk candle goes out, we switch with one of yours."

"And the oskerei don't know the difference? Really?"

"Not even the marks matter. Only where the candles are placed on the table when they are lit. A small mercy, Mama calls it. The only thing we can get past them, Papa says."

"Unless, I suppose, you're the outsider whose candle has been switched."

"Yes, Livvy." There. He'd said her name again. And it felt just as good rolling off his tongue the second time as the first.

"And if it is the outsider's candle that goes out? What then?"

"The oskerei will have him, surely as if he were Grimsfolk born. Once a candle is lit, there is no going back. Doesn't matter whose it is."

"Oh," she says.

He snuggles closer, her belly firm and round against his hip.

"Only one thing I don't understand. If these candles are so important, why trust their safekeeping to a child — your sister?"

"Coughs and sneezes."

"Pardon me?"

"In the beginning, they say, many candles were blown out by those who coughed or sneezed. So the littlest was made to watch, because the littlest will have the littlest cough or sneeze. It is safer, they say. Before Krissy, it was me."

"But Rick — my husband — he could...."

"No. After you bedded down, Papa and me, we fetched some rope. He didn't wake up once."

"You tied him up?" Her voice has gone shaky.

"Stuck a mitten in his mouth too so he would not make a fuss if he did wake up." He senses the fear that suddenly fills her heart.

She takes a long while, then says, "Thank you, Markus."

"You won't tell I told, will you?"

"I promise." She kisses him on the cheek. He turns his head to catch her lips, but she is gone.

*Lust not after her beauty in thine heart; neither let her take thee with her eyelids. Proverbs 6:25.*

"Livvy," he says. "Livvy."

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KRISSY'S HEAD RESTS upon folded arms, her eyes shut tight. A coffee mug sits full upon a stool beside her, placed so as not to disturb the candles should it spill.

Livvy searches three drawers before she finds the knife. Not a spoon rattles.

She searches four cupboards before she finds the pitcher. Not a dish clinks.

She fills the pitcher with water, pauses by the candles, proceeds to the armchair. She extends her arm and empties the pitcher onto her husband's head.

Rick splutters to consciousness, gags the mitten from his mouth. Through muzzy gauze, he sees Livvy looming before him, the pitcher in one hand, the blade in her other. He cries out, but hears nothing. He rises to escape, but goes nowhere.

She holds a finger to her lips, draws his bloodshot focus to his bonds. "We've got to get out of here," she whispers. "Now." She cuts the ropes.

Livvy searches two pockets before she finds the keys to Ulf Skarran's Ford International.

Livvy Hollis primps at the mirror in the hallway, applying the finishing touches to her lips. Red for the holidays. She puckers. Purses. Cocks her head just so. Perfect. For a perfect Christmas. Christmas in New York. Finally, a Christmas with her family.

She smiles, pops the cap back onto the silver tube, as the doorbell chimes.

She does not recognize him at first. It has been a year, after all. He has to tell her: "It's me. Me. Markus Skarran."

"Markus?" She catches her breath. "What are you doing here? How did you find — "

"I've come to be with you. And look. Look what I brought." He raises his hands. A big, fat candle in each. "We can light them together."

"What are you talking about?" She peers over his shoulder to the street. "Where's your family? Your parents?"

"I saw you," he says. "I watched from the stairs. I saw you fill the pitcher. I saw you drip the water on his candle. And then you poured the rest on his head."

"Don't be silly," she says. "I did no such thing."

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"He's been taken, hasn't he?"

"It had nothing to do with your silly superstition. It was an accident. In April."

"I like your lips. The color is pretty."

"Let me call your mother. She must be worried sick."

"No. No, she's not. After, when you and him were gone, I went to the table. I put out the rest."

"You what?"

"All of them. Except two, Livvy. Yours and mine."

"Oh God, Markus, no." She stifles her scream, hand over mouth. Drops the lipstick at his feet. Races to the staircase behind her. Cannot get to the top soon enough. Kicks off her heels. *Please.* Races down the corridor. *Please.* Turns the knob. *Please, God.* Opens the door to her daughter's nursery.

"Where's the kitchen, Livvy? I'll put the candles on the table, Livvy."

## COMING ATTRACTIONS

Next month we've got in store a challenging novella by an award-winning writer named John G. McDaid. If you think of "Keyboard Practice" as *American Idol* for classical pianists, you'll have just an inkling of what to expect from this up-tempo, stylistic, and innovative sf story.

We also expect to bring you back to ancient Babylon, courtesy of Esther M. Friesner. In "Last Man Standing," Ms. Friesner treats us to a comical look at the legend of Gilgamesh from a slightly skewed perspective.

Other stories coming your way soon include Alex Irvine's tale of turn-of-the-century New York, "The Lorelei," and an almost indescribable new fantasy by Bruce Sterling. The months ahead also promise to bring us new tales by M. Rickert, Matthew Hughes, and Paul Di Filippo, to name but a few. Go to our Website at *www.fsfmag.com* or use the business reply card in this issue to subscribe now and you'll be certain not to miss any of the goodies ahead.

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# F&SF COMPETITION #68

## *"The Missing Twist"*

IN THE June 2004 issue, we asked competitors to supply the last page of a famed manuscript, one that revealed a twist ending. The response was fabulous, but in their haste to reply, some did not read the directions carefully enough: Although we gave an example that quoted Sauron from *Lord of the Rings*, some entrants used the example as the basis for their answer. Alas, it was only an example; we wanted entrants to come up with their own twist endings.

FIRST PRIZE:

*Anthem* by Ayn Rand

Then next to the sacred word, "Ego", Gaea scratched the word "Maniac" when Prometheus was not looking.

—Karen Ann Jacobs
Fontana, CA

SECOND PRIZE:

*Lord of the Rings* by J. R. R. Tolkien

Frodo woke up in a cold sweat and suddenly realized it was all a dream. It was then he noticed the ring upon his finger and a matching ring on the hobbit snuggling at his side. His nightmare had just begun!

—Nate Hall
Tucson Arizona

RUNNERS-UP:

*Fahrenheit 451* by Ray Bradbury

Guy found something on the ground and picked it up. It was a sheet of asbestos. A whole pile of asbestos insulation had been left lying around. "Hey, guys," he shouted to the others, "how about we write on this stuff instead of paper?"

—A.R.Yngve
Oslo, Norway

*The Bible*

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—Eugene Calabrese
Maple, Ontario, Canada

"Flowers for Algernon" by Daniel Keyes

p.p.s. i forgot to say that my hollywood ajint just got me 20 millyun dollurs to star in a siens fikshin moovee. The prodooser tells me charly gordon your going to be a sooperstar!! you dont need to be smart if you got karisma and 20 millyun dollurs.

—Adrian Marlowe
Tampa FL

# F&SF COMPETITION #69

PRE-THERAPY TITLES: Some genre works needed a bit of counseling before they were published. Give up to six examples of these poor titles before therapy bolstered their image.

Example:
Current title: *Beauty*, by Sheri Tepper
Before therapy: *A Nice Personality*

RULES: Send entries to Competition Editor, *F&SF*, 240 West 73rd St. #1201, New York, NY 10023-2794, or e-mail entries to carol@cybrid.net. Be sure to include your contact information. Entries must be received by January 15, 2005. Judges are the editors of *F&SF*, and their decision is final. All entries become the property of *F&SF*.

PRIZES: First prize will receive a signed limited edition copy of *Confusion* by Neal Stephenson (published by Hill House). Second prize will receive advance reading copies of three forthcoming novels. Any runners-up will receive one-year subscriptions to *F&SF*. Results of Competition 69 will appear in the June 2005 issue.

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## MISCELLANEOUS

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# CURIOSITIES

## *THE LATE GREAT CREATURE*, BY BROCK BROWER (1971)

FIRST published in 1971, Brock Brower's *The Late Great Creature* is a darkly funny, frequently brilliant novel about the interrelated roles of movies and horror in modern American life. The book takes the form of a fictional biography of aging actor Simon Moro, a larger-than-life figure who evokes both Peter Lorre and Lon Chaney, but remains, in the end, a wholly original creation. Born in 1900 (the true child of a macabre century), Moro made his reputation playing a Lorre-like pedophile in a mythical Fritz Lang film entitled *Zeppelin*. A gallery of B-movie monsters — among them Ghoulgantua, Gila Man, and the Moth — followed, each representing an inspired performance in a less-than-inspired film.

Brower's novel focuses on Simon's last appearance in a low-rent production of *The Raven*. The story emerges from a variety of perspectives that describe Moro's long, colorful career, his bizarre behavior during — and after — the making of the film, and the bloody event that disrupts the film's premiere in a sleazy Manhattan theater. The result is a satiric, horrifying account of one man's plan to deliver a final, unforgettable shock to an increasingly shockproof world.

*The Late Great Creature* is a virtuoso portrait of a unique performer whose life and art are inextricably connected. Simon Moro — who never really existed, but should have — is one of the great comic/horrific figures of modern fiction, a man who prefers "the appalling to the appealing," and whose career stands as a testament to the subversive power of horror.

—Bill Sheehan

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# A PRINCESS STALKED. A KINGDOM DAMNED . . .

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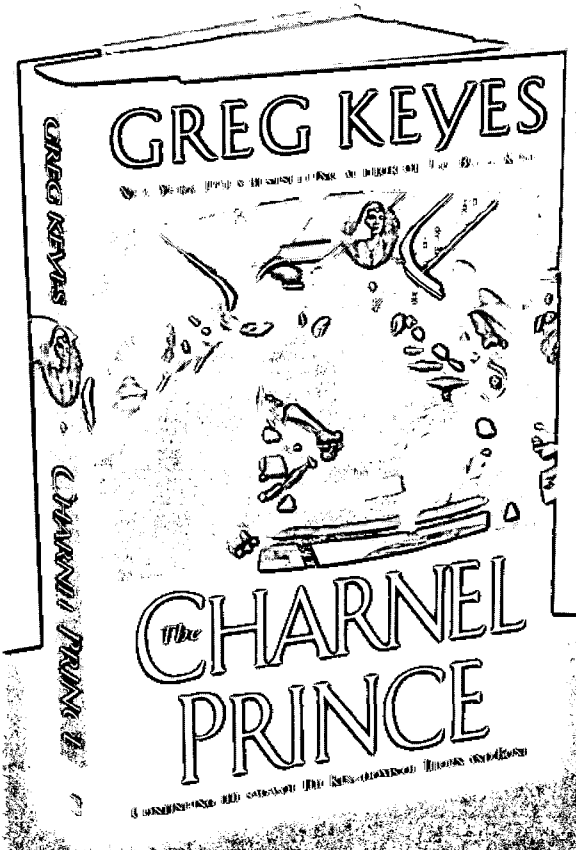


### Praise for *The Briar King*

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—*Publishers Weekly* (Starred Review)

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